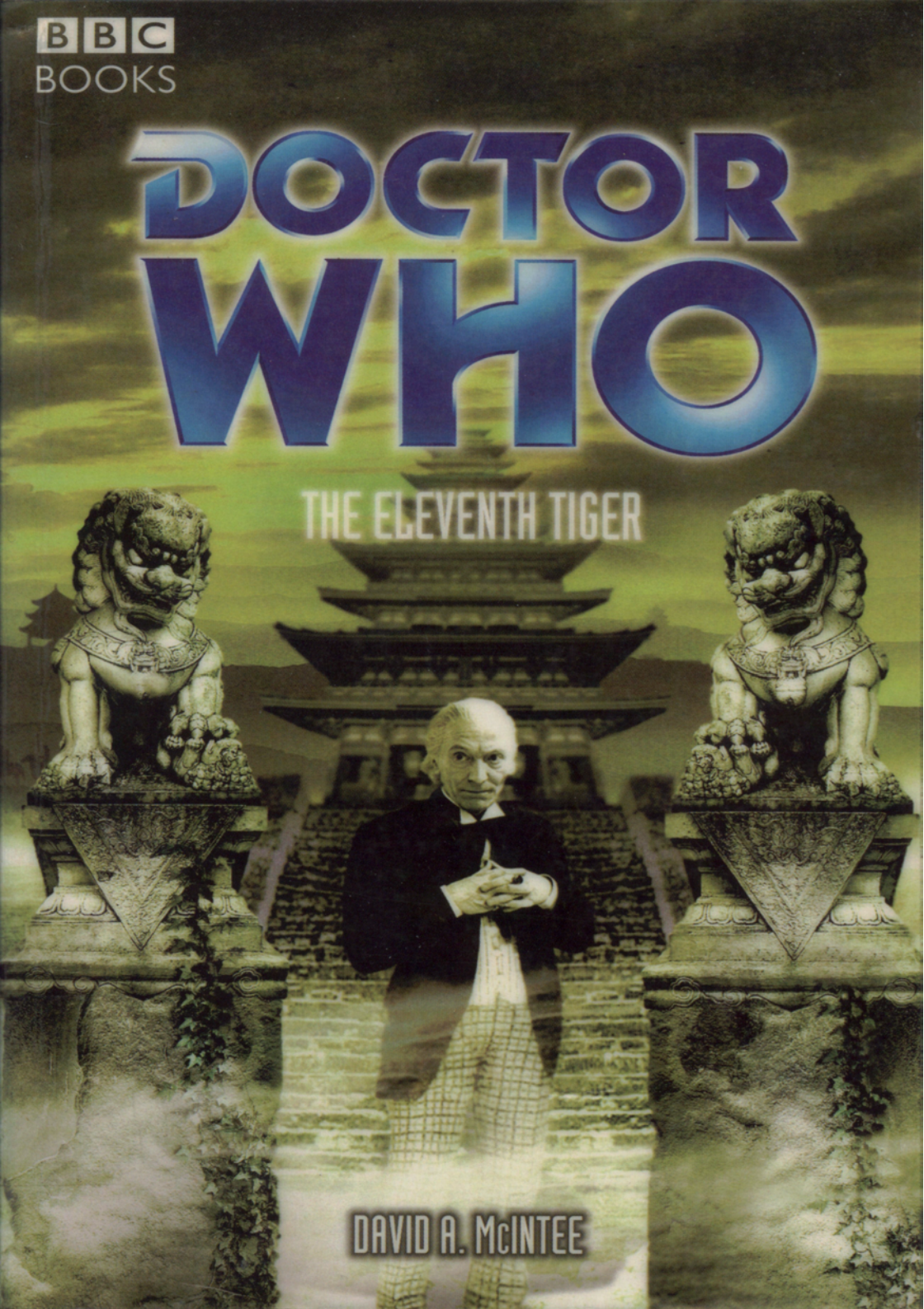


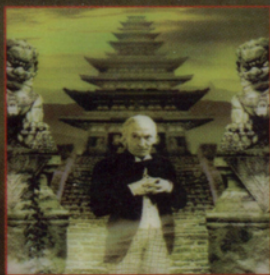
BBC
BOOKS

DOCTOR WHO

THE ELEVENTH TIGER

DAVID A. MCINTEE





'May you live in interesting times.'

The TARDIS crew have seen many different eras. When they arrive in China in 1865, they find banditry, rebellion, and foreign oppression rife. Trying to maintain order are the British Empire and the Ten Tigers of Canton, the most respected martial arts masters in the world.

There is more to chaos than mere human violence and ambition. Can legends of ancient vengeance be coming true? Why does everyone Ian meets already know who he is? The Doctor has his suspicions, but he is occupied by challenges of his own. Soon the travellers must learn that sometimes the greatest danger is not from the enemy, but from the heart.

In interesting times, love can be a weakness, hatred an illusion, order chaos, and ten Tigers not enough.

This adventure features the First Doctor and Ian, Barbara and Vicki.

ISBN 0-563-48614-7



9 780563 486145 >

UK. £5.99 US: \$6.95/\$8.99 Cdn

Doctor Who and TARDIS
are trademarks of the BBC.

DOCTOR WHO

THE ELEVENTH TIGER

DAVID A. MCINTEE

BBC

Published by BBC Worldwide Ltd,
Woodlands, 80 Wood Lane
London W12 OTT

First published 2004
Copyright © David A. McIntee 2004
The moral right of the author has been asserted

Original series broadcast on the BBC
Format © BBC 1963
Doctor Who and TARDIS are trademarks of the BBC

ISBN 0 563 48614 7
Imaging by Black Sheep, copyright © BBC 1999

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Mackays of Chatham
Cover printed by Belmont Press Ltd, Northampton

*If this book is dedicated to anybody,
it should be to Gary and Linda Stratmann,
and to Derek Arundale and the rest of the folks in
Yorkshire's Ji-Tae school of Taekwondo.*

'Beauty and anguish walking hand in hand The downward slope to death'

- The Dream of the Red Chamber

CUTAWAY I

Translated in 1890, from the surviving fragment of 'Mountains and Sunsets' by Ho Lin Chung (AD 1537):

One thousand seven hundred and forty-seven years ago, a Taoist priest, who happened to be passing a hill, sat down for a while to rest under a tree. As the priest ate some bread and rice, he noticed a disconsolate piece of jade which also lay in the shade of his tree.

This piece of jade was in the fashion of a delicate bracelet, of a kind the priest's sister liked to wear. His curiosity aroused by this, he picked up the jade, and was astonished when it began to speak to him.

'Sir Priest,' the stone said, 'perhaps a tale will help your meal settle, and pass the cold night more agreeably.' The priest agreed, and the jade told him the story which was inscribed upon it.

So moved was the priest by the jade's tale, he copied it out from beginning to end as the stone told it to him. Here it is:

Under a Dynasty which the jade leaves unnamed, two Generals had greatly distinguished themselves in battle. These Generals were brothers, by the names of Zhao and Gao, and they were the favourites of the Emperor and lived with him in his great palace at Chang'an. They are the heroes of this tale.

These men, these brothers, divided between them the virtues of a warrior. Zhao was stronger than two oxen, heavy of feature, and a more powerful man the Emperor had never seen. Gao was fleet of foot, and with the agility of any monkey, but his features were fine and well turned.

One day, the Emperor bade his Generals bring to him the most learned priests and scholars in the Empire. Gao ran the

length and breadth of the Empire, taking the Emperor's orders to every school and temple in every city of the Seven Kingdoms. In this way, one thousand six hundred and forty priests and scholars were prepared when Zhao arrived to carry them all to the Emperor's palace.

'Great Majesty,' the Generals said, 'here are the priests and scholars you bade us bring to you.'

The Emperor remained as aloof and regal as befits Heaven's representative on Earth. He retreated with the priests and scholars, and for ten years the Emperor was not seen, not even by his two favourite Generals.

During these long years, made sad by the absence of their beloved Emperor, the brothers took good care of the Empire. They also loved and married, and became fathers to strong sons, whose descendants would be Generals for ever more.

After those ten long years, the Emperor once again called the brothers to his side. 'Loyal Generals,' the Emperor said, 'you have done well to do my bidding while I have been studying with these priests and scholars. Now I have a task for you.'

'Anything, Great Majesty,' the Generals replied. The Emperor smiled, pleased by their loyalty and their prowess at doing his will. The Emperor pointed to the one thousand six hundred and forty men of learning, and told his Generals to put them all to the sword, that no-one else might learn from them what he had learnt.

Being warriors, the work of dispatching men by the sword was familiar and easy to the brothers. Gao slashed more quickly than the eye could see, piercing ten in the time it takes a man to blink. His brother Zhao clove men in two with the tiniest gesture of his great sword.

Overcome with emotion, the Generals thanked the Emperor, and begged him to give them new orders that they might obey to please him further. 'Test your soldiers,' the Emperor ordered, 'and choose the eight thousand best among them to be brought before me.'

This the brothers did, and soon the eight thousand greatest warriors in the Emperor's army paraded before him. The

Emperor was pleased. 'You will come with me,' he said, 'into Heaven and Hell. You will be my bodyguards for ever.'

Having so engaged these men, the Emperor sought to have them prove themselves to him, and so he instructed them to take every scroll and book and map from every library in the Empire. When the Eight Thousand had gathered this proud and eclectic population, the Emperor had the frightened books built into the shape of a hill. 'Now,' he told the books, 'your secrets will remain secret, and I will guard them well, and you will never tell.'

So saying, the Emperor had his beloved Generals join the brightness of flame to the dryness of the paper, that none of the garrulous books could divulge secrets that only the Emperor should know. Only one brave scroll remained: a map, which was the Emperor's closest companion and dearest friend.

Led by the map, the Emperor took the Generals and the Eight Thousand to the Islands of Japan. There, under his leadership, and the brothers' skills at warfare, the warriors triumphed over all who stood against them. The loyal map had brought its Emperor safely to the castle of a great Shogun, who was also a priest. It was this man whom the Emperor wished to speak with.

The Shogun-priest's castle was built upon a mound of stones two hundred and twelve feet high, and guarded by one hundred thousand samurai. The Emperor's eight thousand warriors were each worth twenty samurai, and quickly turned the tide of battle. The samurai were cut down easily by the best warriors in Asia.

The Shogun-priest laughed at this, for the samurai's duty was to die for his master. Impressed by the Emperor and the Eight Thousand, the Shogun held a great feast to celebrate that they had passed the test he set them.

The Shogun then gave the Emperor a great gift, telling the Emperor all that he needed to know to fulfil his dreams. He also taught the Emperor to read the stars in the sky, to know when Heaven was closest to the Earth, and most reachable. The Shogun then left his castle.

When the Generals came to him once more, the Emperor rewarded them with amulets given to him by the Shogun-priest. Zhao received a most marvellous piece of jade, with the inscription: 'Lose me not, forget me not, Eternal life shall be your lot.' Gao was awarded a wonderful gold amulet, upon which also were certain words inscribed. On it was written: 'Let not this token wander from your side, And youth perennial shall with you abide.'

Watching the stars as the Shogun-priest had taught him, the Emperor decided that it was time that he, his Generals, and the eight thousand best warriors in the world, took their place in Heaven. And so, the Emperor entered Heaven upon his return from the Islands of Japan.

His son, and the brothers who were Generals, followed the instructions that the Emperor had given to them, and which he had received from the one thousand six hundred and forty priests and scholars.

And the Generals, loyal and fearless as warriors should be, followed their Emperor in all things, and with strength and quickness of fist, foot and sword, conquered Heaven and Hell. All but one.

And there the Taoist priest stopped writing, with the rising of the sun. The cold night had indeed passed agreeably. But the priest's curiosity was not sated, and he asked the jade: 'What of the one you mentioned? What of his tale?'

'If you return this way another night,' the jade told him, that tale will pass that night as agreeably as this one, for it is another story.'

CHAPTER ONE

Executioners from Shaolin

I

Hoof beats and heartbeats blended into a frantic drumming in Cheng's ears. His horse wasn't foaming at the mouth yet, but he could tell it was only a matter of time - and not a long time, at that.

The Mongols used to say that a fast horse under you, and the wind in your hair, were among the best things in life. Maybe that was true if you rode simply for pleasure. As he rode in flight Cheng thought the cold air stinging his eyes, and the bouncing of the horse's strong back hammering at his spine, were the least pleasant necessities he knew of.

A glance over his shoulder showed that his companions were keeping up with him, the faces of their mounts contorted in wild effort. Like himself, the men all wore loose shirts and dark trousers. Also like himself, they were all festooned with daggers, swords and bows. Beyond them there was no sign of the expected pursuit.

Cheng slowed his horse. His companions followed suit as they came alongside. 'You think we've put enough distance between us and that caravan?' Li asked, wiping the dust from his scarred face.

'Yes,' Cheng said. 'I see no horses following us. Anyway, ours need to rest before they drop dead under us.' He looked up at a leaden sky that was darkening by the moment. 'We'll need to find shelter, and soon.'

Li looked up and nodded. 'Bad one coming.'

'As bad as I've seen,' Cheng agreed.

He looked round at his group. Nine men, including himself, and nine horses. They would need more than a woodsman's

hut to shelter in. A full-sized farm would be best, but there was nothing of that nature in sight.

Fields stretched for miles, with only the occasional patch of bushes to offer any kind of cover. To the left a hill rose, its sides scattered with trees.

‘What about there?’ Li asked. ‘There must be a cave, or something.’

Cheng considered the hill. It wasn’t large enough to be a mountain, but it was a good enough size to have a cave or two in which they could hide. ‘All right. Li, you tie the horses under cover. We’ll look for more shelter.’

It didn’t take long for Cheng to find a low cave halfway up the hill. It was wide, but they’d have to bend almost double to get inside it. That didn’t bother Cheng too much; the ceiling would be at a comfortable enough height when he and his friends were sitting around a fire or sleeping on a dry floor.

Pang worked his magic with flint, tinder and a dry tree branch. In moments, the torch was handed to Cheng and he crawled into the cave. There was no sign of animal tracks on the dry earthen floor, and certainly no sign of people, but this didn’t mean there were no hidden dangers. Cheng thrust the torch out in front of him, pushing it into every nook and cranny to check for snakes - which were only too happy to reside in such places.

Once he was satisfied that the cave was safe he called the others inside. The horses would have to shelter under the trees, which were already beginning to sway in the wind. So long as lightning didn’t hit one that was close to a horse, the animals should be safe enough. Just to be on the safe side, Cheng brought his saddle pouch into the cave with him. The other men did likewise, none of them willing to risk losing any of the loot they had gained that morning.

Cheng watched with a smile as the lads stored their stolen goods and weapons in a natural alcove as far from the cave entrance as possible. Some of them then set to skinning rabbits, while Pang built a proper fire over which they could

cook meat, and which would keep them warm while they slept.

Outside, the rain had started and the trees were thrashing around as if under the guiding hands of lion dancers. Inside, the smell of wood smoke and roasting meat and spices failed to mask the smell of dusty, unwashed clothes and bodies.

Cheng grinned to himself thinking of how he would buy fine silks with his share of the loot, and girls to wash and pamper him. He found himself a slope of earth against the cave wall and settled down to wait out the storm. The earth would be more comfortable than rock against his back.

The low murmur of his companions' chat faded as he began to doze off. He could almost see nubile bath attendants waiting to greet him as he started to dream.

Suddenly, the earth supporting his back crumbled and he fell, his shoulder skipping painfully over stubs of rock. His companions laughed.

'Shut your damned faces,' Cheng snapped. He had landed on his side, and pulled himself up into a sitting position. 'Anyone who thinks...' He fell silent, realising that he and the earth had fallen through the wall. There was a new and irregular gap, starkly black in the fire-lit wall. 'What the hell?'

Pang stuck a branch into the fire, then brought it over in his meaty fist and poked it into the opening. 'It looks like a tunnel. I think there are steps.'

Cheng took the torch and threw it, carefully, as far as it would go. Then he looked in and saw that Pang was right. Earth and rubble half-filled the rocky passageway. It sloped downwards, and below it steps were carved into the floor. The torch, still alight, was on one of them.

'What the hell is this place?' Pang asked.

Cheng wished he had an answer for the big man, but he had grown up the son of a farmer, not a builder. 'Let's take a look and see.'

Cheng and his companions looked around in awe, and tried to breathe. The air was musty and ancient, thick with dust that it was easy to believe had come from old bones. Pillars

encrusted in the mineral deposits of centuries stretched either up to, or down from, the ceiling - Cheng wasn't sure which. The encrustations were flaky, and reminded him of windblown leaves sticking to tree trunks. The entire place was a forest of stone.

The bandits, all of whom now carried torches, spread out through the cave. There were no furnishings, and no lost piles of treasure. If Cheng had to guess, he'd say it was probably a meeting place, or perhaps an exercise hall.

'Follow the walls,' he said quietly. The acoustics of the cave were such that his words would carry. 'There must be other chambers somewhere in here.'

The others nodded and spread out. From the way the light of their torches seemed to shrink, Cheng could tell the space was vast.

A movement above him caught Cheng's eye, and when he looked up the breath caught in his throat. A silver flash like a shooting star was fading between the stone trees, and he could see bright, clear stars.

For a moment he thought the cave must be open to the sky, until he remembered the rainstorm outside and the height of the hill above him. There were indeed stars above him, in the familiar constellations, but they were glinting with reflected light from the bandits' torches. Hoping they were jewels, Cheng held his own torch as far aloft as he could, and squinted.

The stars were some kind of metal set into the roof of the cave. And it looked like silver. Not silver ore, either, but refined and polished silver, which must surely have been put there deliberately.

'Pang! Li!'

The two men came running, and the rest of the group, curious, followed them. Cheng pointed upwards. 'Have you seen this? It looks like silver.'

'Silver? The gods must be with us tonight!' Li said cheerfully.

Pang shivered slightly. 'I don't know about this.' The other bandits looked at him. 'This place, it's full of ghosts. Can't you feel them?'

'No,' Cheng lied. The place was spooky, but why let that get in the way of earning a living?

'I can. This place is old, Cheng.' Pang touched the nearest pillar gently, running his hand along the mineral bark. 'It feels like something that was here before the rest of the world.' He hesitated. 'Why are there no bats in here?'

'I don't know.'

'Maybe because only ghosts could have lived in something so ancient.'

Nobody laughed at Pang's tone, or at the idea of ghosts.

'I'm going back up to keep an eye on the fire. I don't like this.' With that, the big man turned back towards the tunnel. A couple of the other men looked uncertain, then followed Pang's lead.

'More for the rest of us,' Cheng said. He put his hands together as a stirrup for Li. 'Can you get one of those stars loose?'

Li nodded and put his foot in Cheng's hands. Cheng hefted him up, and leant back against a pillar. Li lifted his other foot on to Cheng's shoulder, and drew out a small dagger. When he touched its point to the surface of the star Cheng saw the silver ripple.

Li jerked back and fell on to the ground. He glared at the tip of his dagger. 'Quicksilver.' He stood up and looked at the ceiling. 'But how? Why doesn't it rain down?'

'Quicksilver?' Cheng echoed. That explained the liquid ripple, but Li was right to wonder how it came to be on the ceiling. Cheng didn't have an explanation for him, and momentarily wondered if Pang might have been right about the ghosts. Then there was another flicker across the artificial starscape; a pale wash of quicksilver, thin enough to be all but transparent, flowed from constellation to constellation. Cheng stopped wondering: Pang was right.

'Hell's teeth,' he whispered. 'Let's get out of this cursed -'

A cry and a solid thud from the direction of the tunnel shut him up. Had a ghost...? No, had Pang slipped or had the tunnel caved in? A fallen torch was burning on the floor and, in its light, Cheng could see Pang lying on the ground. Blood matted his hair, but he was still alive, moaning faintly.

There was no sign of the two men who had joined him in his flight. Cheng didn't need to ask what had happened - a lean young man wearing the robes of a martial monk was already stepping into the cavern. He twirled a staff guardedly, and stepped aside to let in a muscle-bound ox of a monk who was carrying a pair of nunchuks. An older man, undoubtedly their leader, followed them. He was unarmed and Cheng found this slightly worrying. The older monk - an abbot? - was either relying on the others to protect him, or he was a master. From the way he carried himself, with an air that said he had nothing to prove, Cheng was certain it was the latter.

The abbot stepped forward, casual but alert. 'Bandits! Give yourselves up now, and I will see that you are not executed.'

Years breaking rocks under the sun and eating rats in a light-less dungeon didn't seem much of an improvement over death to Cheng. His companions' attitude was similar, and Cheng could see and hear them drawing their weapons as he pulled a sabre from his belt. 'You're outnumbered, monk,' he said. 'Leave now and I'll let you keep the same number of limbs as you had when you came in.'

The abbot didn't reply. Instead, a flick of his foot sent Pang's fallen torch spinning towards Cheng's face. Cheng cut it aside with his sword, but the moving flame had wrecked his night vision and he found himself momentarily blind in the darkness of the cave.

He moved instinctively, dodging behind a pillar he knew was on his left. The cave erupted with the sounds of running feet, steel on steel and wood on flesh. This last sound, he knew, was from that damned staff carried by the lean monk, who could take on several people at once with it - striking with one end to the front then the other behind in the blink of an eye, and then immediately swinging it like a club.

As his eyes readjusted, Cheng thought he'd been tipped into one of the hells. Firelight waved and spun, causing shadows and darkness to tumble, as a couple of the bandits used their torches as weapons and swung them at the monks. He ignored them, and headed for the lean monk with the staff.

As Cheng had feared, he already had two fallen bandits at his feet. Cheng darted forward, but the monk still managed to crack a bandit on the forehead and in the groin with opposite ends of the staff, and swing it up in time to block Cheng's sabre. The wood was old and hard, and almost as dense as iron. The sabre bit into it a little, but the damned staff didn't break.

The monk twisted, and Cheng had to let go of his sabre and twist away to avoid being jabbed in the face with the tip of the wood. Then Li appeared between him and the monk, catching the staff in crossed butterfly swords. 'Thanks,' Cheng whispered, not wanting to distract Li.

The big monk, who was broader across the shoulders than even the bear-like Pang, was duelling with his nunchuks against those wielded by young Ho-Wei. There was no sign of the abbot, and Cheng hoped against hope that one of his men had put the old bastard down.

He bent to scoop up his sabre, thinking he would help Li to teach the staff-wielder a lesson. As he straightened he saw a blur out of the corner of his eye. Pain exploded through his mind, overloading all his senses before his brain could finish telling him that the blur was an incoming roundhouse kick. His friends and enemies momentarily danced horizontally out from a wall. Cheng blinked, and realised he was lying on the floor, not leaning against the wall.

He pulled himself to the wall of the cave, dodging instinctively without waiting to see whether or not the monk was lashing out at him again. His vision cleared, and the throbbing in his head became the stirrings of rage.

It was the abbot, of course. Cheng twisted and rolled to his feet, lashing out with his fists. He had no idea where his sabre had landed. The abbot slid aside without any visible

effort, letting all Cheng's punches and kicks connect only with thin air. Then a flick of his wrist tapped Cheng's ear with what felt like the impact of a horse's hoof.

This time Cheng stayed down, his arms and legs refusing his aching brain's order to lift him up. From where he lay he could see Li finally take a blow to the back of his knees and crumple. He couldn't see Ho-Wei or anyone else, but he didn't hear any more sounds of fighting. One way or the other, the fight was over.

A tremendous weight sank into the small of Cheng's back, and the abbot grabbed his hands and pulled them behind him. 'You should have listened,' he told him. Cheng felt taut rope against his wrists. He tried to struggle free, but only succeeded in scraping his skin painfully against the rough bindings the abbot was putting on him.

He could see the lean monk tying Li's wrists. Cheng raged inwardly - he and Li were being made ready to be taken, like pigs to the butcher - but he was held too tightly to break free and give the abbot the kicking he deserved. 'These men are good companions, not animals to be slaughtered,' he snarled into the floor. 'If you think differently, then it's you who deserve to be executed.' The abbot didn't bother to reply.

Maybe it was the blows he'd taken to his head, but Cheng thought he saw the false stars in the ceiling glow brighter for a moment, and the strange ripple of light pass more strongly overhead. The monk binding Li's wrists must have noticed this because he froze in the middle of his knot-tying.

Hoping that his own captor was similarly distracted, Cheng twisted against his grip and was suddenly free of it. His hands were solidly tied behind his back, but his legs were still unbound and he used them to roll aside. The abbot didn't seem to notice but, after a moment, he straightened and started to turn away.

Cheng's blood was boiling with the desire to strike back at the young monk and kill him, but he knew he couldn't. He simply wasn't a match for the monks' power and their training. The impotence he felt about this simply made his blood boil even more.

As the abbot turned, Cheng caught a glimpse of his features, and all thoughts of violence fled his mind. The abbot's expression was impassive, stunned, and he seemed to freeze, but his eyes were filled with light - not the poetic light of passionate emotion or vitality, but a soft, unnatural fluorescence. They were like two candle flames casting faint beams ahead of him.

Cheng had never seen anything like it, and never wanted to again. The ghosts, he thought frantically. Pang had been right, and the place was home to ghosts. Not peaceful *shen*, the spirits of revered ancestors, but demonic *kui* seeking vengeance upon the living for whatever misdeed they perceived had been done to them.

Cheng thanked his lucky stars that the *kui* had taken over the monks instead of him, and didn't intend to give them a chance to change their minds. He used his free but shaking legs to push himself up against a pillar, and staggered for the exit. Pang and the others had already gone, and Cheng could see Li and Ho-Wei crawling towards the tunnel as fast as their injuries would permit.

He didn't stop to assist them - anyway, what could he do with his hands bound? It wasn't as if he could help them to their feet, or carry one of them. He stumbled into the blackness of the tunnel, climbing up towards the light of the fire Pang had built in the cave earlier. It provided a point to aim for, though it didn't help him to find the steps or avoid fallen rocks.

Cheng slumped forward on to the rubble blocking the top part of the tunnel and wriggled through into the cave. He flopped on the earth floor and took a shuddering breath, the relief of having got out of the accursed hall almost overwhelming him. The freshness of the stormy air was electrifying after the fug below. For a moment he thought he'd burst into tears, but it didn't quite come to that.

He heard horses departing outside, and instinctively knew Pang and the others were making their getaway. He didn't even think of pausing to consider how he might grab the loot lying by the fire. Instead, he went straight outside into the

cool night air. The loot was surely cursed now anyway, and he had no further taste for it.

The rain had stopped, though the wind was still strong. The eye of the storm was overhead and the sky was temporarily clear. Cheng froze for an instant, staring once again at the sky. The moon had gone and its place in the heavens was marked only by a hole in the stars. The night was as enclosed and dark as the cave behind him.

Then a silver arc appeared in the blackness, like the white of an eye appearing as the eyelid parted on waking. It was the moon emerging from hiding, casting a gentle silver light on the hillside.

Cheng ran awkwardly, his hands still tied, stumbling towards his horse. There was a sword in a scabbard hanging from the saddle and he was able to cut his bindings with it. Then he mounted the horse and galloped off downhill, not caring which direction he was going in. All that mattered was that he was heading away from the unnatural cave and its ghosts.

2

A few miles ahead, the mountain of Baiyun rose up and melted into the pale, fading light, and the young man who walked hand in hand with his girl was glad not to be going that far. It was a pleasant enough evening for a walk in the countryside, the air fresh, the warmth of the setting sun matching the warmth of their companionship.

A short way ahead the cart track turned and, beneath the trees, became a shadowy, overgrown path. To his surprise, the girl stepped off the road and tugged on his hand to follow her. Come on, I brought you this way for a reason.'

The young man couldn't really know what the reason was without being a mind-reader, but he could make an educated guess that was at least partly a wish. Feeling his blood buzz, he followed her.

A hundred yards or so from the track, the path reached a flat space in front of an old temple.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ Miss Law asked.

The youth nodded. It was, in its way. It was old and tumbledown, but also shaded and full of the richest textures an artist could dream of. Then he looked up to where the roof beams hung down like broken teeth, and felt the temple’s beauty fade into intimidation.

Fei-Hung tried not to tilt his head too far back as he looked at the broken beams and precarious walls, not wanting Miss Law to see that he was nervous about their surroundings. ‘This is your little hideaway?’

She smiled, and sat demurely on a piece of broken wall near the shape of an old doorway. Her skirt clung to her thighs in a way that drove any fears from the young man’s mind. ‘Oh, yes. No-one ever comes here, because they think it’s haunted. So we’ll be undisturbed.’

‘Good, I’d hate to be disturbed.’ He sat beside her and embraced her happily. ‘I’m glad we’re alone.’ He seemed to recall he had practised the speech in his mind over the past few days, but the relevant part of his brain seemed to be empty. ‘I wanted to...’

‘So do I.’

‘You don’t know what I was going to say.’

She cupped his face in her hand. ‘Doesn’t matter. I’d say yes to anything you wanted.’

‘Anything?’ His head felt as if it was floating.

‘Yes. I love you, you know.’

He tensed, startled. He had known, of course. Or at least hoped. He still felt as if his head was floating. His stomach, weighing a ton, tried to drag it down. ‘In that case...’ He kissed her rather than continue.

Their conversation became much less vocal from then on, words replaced by touches, and sensations, and emotions. If there was anything better in life than to make love under the stars of a clear sky, the young man couldn’t imagine what it might be.

The night grew cool, but it wasn’t cold and the warmth each gave the other was enough to be comfortable with. In

turn, the comfort was enough for them to relax and drift off to sleep.

The stars wheeled imperceptibly overhead, and the animals of the countryside ignored the sleeping humans as they went about their nightly routines. In every way it was a safe, quiet and calm night, ideal for lovers spending it together in the countryside.

In every way except one.

The young man was startled into wakefulness. At first he thought a bird or animal had made a noise in its quest for food or a mate, but he heard nothing that he recognised as coming from the local fauna. Instead, there was a strange sound; a rushing, hooting noise as if all the demons in hell were moaning in agony. What is that?

Miss Law woke with a slight scream. She collected herself. 'I don't know. I've never heard such a thing before.'

The lovers looked at each other, each seeing the same thought playing across the other's face. 'This place is haunted!' they exclaimed together.

Fei-Hung took Miss Law's hand and led her towards the nearest gap in the temple wall. Suddenly, the air darkened in front of them and a pair of locked wooden doors appeared out of the darkness, blocking their path. An eerie light flared above, washing over the temple, though with no flame to cast it.

The pair turned and ran for the nearest empty doorway. As they fled, the unnatural noise faded. And the instant they passed out of the old haunted temple the sound ceased altogether. Despite this, the frightened young people didn't stop running until they reached the familiar tower of Zhenhailou, well inside the city.

Only then did they stop for breath.

'What do we do?' Miss Law asked.

'Ask my father; he'll know what to do.'

'Does he know about us?'

'He'll claim not to, but he's not stupid. Come on.'

The young man led the way, dodging through the empty streets. Miss Law followed, keeping up with him easily

despite her restrictive skirt. It didn't take long to reach the gates to the compound Fei-Hung called home. They were already locked for the night and the pair had to scale the wall to get inside. Luckily, it wasn't high.

The young man ran straight to the door of his father's room and hammered on the nearest wooden beam with his fist. 'Father! Father!'

After a moment Wong Kei-Ying slid the door aside and came out, tying a robe tightly about himself. 'What is it? Bandits? Police?'

'No, no, it's all right. I mean, it's all right here, but we just saw...' The youth hesitated, unable to put a name to what they had seen. 'We heard something in the old haunted temple.'

'Haunted temple? And what were you doing there?' The older man's eyes darted to Miss Law and back.

'Well, I... We wanted somewhere to...' Fei-Hung wished he could think of a phrase that wasn't embarrassing for either Miss Law or himself.

'I understand well enough. I was your age myself once.' Kei-Ying turned to Miss Law. 'You must be Miss Law. I spoke to your mother at *yum cha* the other day. She says good things about you.'

Something in his tone suggested that the definition of good things didn't extend to going to haunted temples with boys, and the young man winced slightly.

'I hope Fei-Hung has been a proper gentleman in his dealings with you.'

'Yes, Wong-sifu,' Miss Law said. 'It was my idea to see the old temple. I'd heard so much about it, and had no idea it was so late.'

Kei-Ying nodded, his face softening into an almost-smile. He led them back into the main room, and sat beside a tea service that was kept permanently ready. He poured out three cups. 'It's just an old temple.'

'Wong-sifu, it really was haunted.'

'Really?' He looked suspiciously at Fei-Hung. 'Noises in the dark? The settling of stone?'

Fei-Hung shook his head. 'I swear it. There was a wailing from all the souls in hell, and then this dark gate appeared out of thin air. Father, you must believe me!'

Wong-sifu's eyes narrowed and he leant forward slightly, sniffing. 'I believe,' he said dryly, 'I smell wine.'

'Well,' Fei-Hung admitted, 'I had just had supper before we went, and a cup or two of wine to wash it down. I'm not drunk.'

Without warning, Wong-sifu tossed a cup towards Fei-Hung's head. The young man caught it deftly, and put it down. His father nodded to himself, apparently satisfied by the test. 'All right, you're not drunk. We will go and take a look at this gate of yours in the morning.'

Fei-Hung couldn't believe his ears - because his father had agreed to go to the temple, but also because he was going to wait so long before doing so. The demonic thing was there now. 'The morning?'

Kei-Ying nodded, sipping his tea. 'When it's light, and the wine has worn off, we will see everything more clearly.'

Fei-Hung knew better than to press his father further, and was anyway in two minds about going back to a haunted temple in the dark. Besides, he still had Miss Law's company as they took tea, and that was more important.

When his father had returned to bed the young people sat outside on the veranda overlooking the courtyard. The night again seemed calm and pleasant. There were plenty of lamps to banish the shadows, and perhaps even the memory of them.

'Your father doesn't believe us at all, does he?' Miss Law sighed.

Fei-Hung laughed, but not loudly enough to wake anyone. 'If he didn't believe us at all, he'd have given me a clip round the ear for waking him.'

He looked north in the direction of the old temple. The city was in the way, but this didn't stop his thoughts from returning there. Something had happened, and he wondered whether a mere mortal such as himself could ever understand what it was.

Ian Chesterton had finished shaving, and was patting his face dry with a towel, when something in the air changed.

It was some kind of vibration from the engines deep in the bowels of the Ship. He never noticed it while in flight, but had been aboard the TARDIS long enough to know that when he became aware of this subtle change a landing was imminent.

It was funny how one could get used to the strangest circumstances. A couple of years ago he had thought teaching basic science at Coal Hill School and living in a small flat in Shoreditch were normal. Now he thought his flat would seem dark and mysterious compared with the familiar sterility of the Ship, and his pupils almost as odd as the beings he'd met on more planets than he could count.

He pulled on a jacket and left his room. He hurried towards the doors to the console room, almost bumping into Barbara Wright as she emerged from her room. This had never been unusual, as she used to teach history in a classroom just a couple of doors along from his own.

'You felt it too,' he said.

'Yes,' she said with a smile. 'I wonder where it'll be this time? And when.' Together, they went into the Ship's control room.

The console room was as big as a Coal Hill School classroom, and was surrounded by a bright and clinical white that somehow never got dusty or dirty. A bank of computers and instruments lined one of the walls, behind a glass partition, while glowing roundels were indented into the others. Furniture from various periods of history was dotted around: an ornate ormolu clock, a Louis XIV chair, a gramophone.

At the centre was a large, hexagonal control board - even after two years of living within its sphere of influence Ian was still conscious of the power and mystery it radiated. Six panels of controls and instruments surrounded a glass column filled with strange tubes and filaments, and an energy that Ian could feel even if he could neither see nor name it.

The Doctor was already fussing over the control board. With his Edwardian frock coat and checked trousers, he looked almost as out of place as his furniture against all the futuristic technology.

Vicki, the other member of the Ship's company - Ian had never quite decided whether they were crew or passengers - was already in the console room, lounging on a chaise longue. She was young enough to be one of Ian and Barbara's pupils, but Ian was glad she wasn't in his class. For one thing, she came from five hundred years in his future when the science he could teach would be as out of date as medieval alchemy was to himself.

'There you are, Chesterton,' the Doctor said. 'Barbara, I think we are shortly about to land.'

'Have you any idea where, or when?'

'No, I'm sorry, young man. We shall just have to wait until the Ship has landed, and then perhaps we'll be able to tell.'

As if his words had been an instruction, the centre column slowed to a halt.

Ian stepped out of the Ship into the overgrown remains of an old building. Moonlight picked out pale fungi growing on stones, while the undergrowth wrapped itself in darkness. The Ship hummed softly behind him, like a purring cat that had found a comfortable nook in which to rest for a while.

'There's no-one around,' Ian called back. 'It looks like some kind of ruined temple or something.' He looked up into the night. The familiar constellation of Orion looked back down at him. Ian smiled, greeting this old friend. 'It's Earth!'

Barbara emerged, looking hopeful. 'Earth? Are you sure?'

'Look at the constellations, Barbara.' Ian pointed. 'Orion; there's the Pole Star; the Plough over there. All constellations as you can see them from Earth.' He squinted. 'Mind you, we must be a bit further south than England.'

She squeezed his hand. 'It's always nice to be back.'

'Yes, I know what you mean.' He turned as Vicki and the Doctor came out, the latter pausing to lock the doors of the TARDIS. 'It's Earth,' he repeated.

‘But of course, dear boy,’ the Doctor crowed. ‘But of course. This is exactly what I’d hoped for. And, what’s more, with any luck we are in your 1960s.’

Ian’s heart caught in his throat, and he could see that Barbara also looked hopeful. Both of them had heard that particular prediction before, however, and had been let down often enough not to let excitement run away with them. ‘Are you sure?’

The Doctor nodded.

‘But how?’ Ian asked.

‘Well, I didn’t tell you, because I didn’t want to disappoint you if it didn’t work, but as we left Rome I tried to make the shortest increment - that is to say, the shortest journey - that I could. That way, I hoped we should travel in time only, and not space.’ The Doctor gestured around him with a triumphant smile. ‘And, as you can see, it has worked!’

Ian wanted to believe it had worked perfectly, but simply couldn’t. It just wasn’t in him to do so. ‘You’ll forgive me if I wait to see the morning’s paper. Oh, this is Earth all right, and I’ll take your word for it that we’ve travelled forward in time. But we might just as easily have arrived in 1940, or the twenty-first century.’

The Doctor was slightly deflated. ‘Well, yes, that is true, unfortunately. There’s no way to tell exactly how far forward we’ve travelled. We will just have to go out and meet someone who can tell us the date, won’t we?’

‘And hope it isn’t Hitler, or someone like that.’

‘Oh, don’t fuss so,’ the Doctor snapped. ‘Anyway, it’s far too late at night to go round knocking people up. I suggest we get some rest until dawn, and then explore.’

Vicki looked downcast, but Ian was satisfied with the arrangement. ‘Sounds good to me, Doctor.’ He ushered Vicki back into the TARDIS before she could go off and get herself into trouble. He paused in the doorway and looked back at Barbara. ‘Are you coming?’

‘Yes.’ Barbara stretched her arms, taking a deep breath of the wonderful air. ‘At least it’s peaceful here,’ she said.

‘It does feel that way, doesn’t it?’ Ian admitted. ‘Something in the air perhaps. Or this place.’

‘The place, yes. There’s a sort of... I don’t know... spirituality about it. You can’t really imagine anything bad happening here.’

Ian stepped back out of the Ship. He didn’t say anything, not wanting to disappoint Barbara by telling her that there was as likely to be unpleasantness in any one place where there were people as in any other. He took her hand instead, and squeezed it. ‘A peaceful place sounds good to me.’

4

His head felt as if it had burst like a soap bubble, and he was certain that if he could see anything other than blackness it would surely be the shade of blood. The blackness had crushed him and jammed his lungs solid. Every bone in his body burnt inside its sheath of flesh, but his head burnt worst of all.

The blackness rolled around him, then faded above him. Was this death, allowing him to float up to heaven on a breeze? The stars began to wink, each point of light making his head throb. He could hear things over the din in his head: hooves splashing in mud; screams, and the jarring clash of steel on steel; wood snapping and the crackle of burning. His hands flailed out, slapping against the dry darkness that had broken him, as he tried to pull himself along.

His legs were buried somewhere and he knew he had to exhume them, but whatever grave held him below the waist wasn’t letting go without a fight. A noise was coming from somewhere nearby. ‘Major!’ it called, ‘Sir, where are you?’ He wished the major would hurry up and answer; the repetition was beginning to irritate him. At least there were people around. If he could only breathe, he could shout back to them.

‘There he is,’ another voice called, closer. Then there were bodies around him, stamping on the ground. Random words

and phrases emanated from them: ‘... didnae see him... at the double, Sergeant... horse... they come back...’

Then the grave that held him relaxed its grip and he pulled himself free, gorging himself on smoke-scented air until he thought he might be sick with it.

He let himself relax as his breathing steadied. To one side he saw two men standing by his grave. A four-legged, hooped grave. He coughed, tasting blood, but the tingle in his gums told him it came from there, not further down. The nearest man knelt. He was short and lined, but tough-looking, with a nose that surely hadn’t started its life in the shape it now was. Like the other man, this one wore a uniform: black trousers, dark tunic, and white belt and gloves. His tunic was dirty and torn, his face scratched in several places.

‘Are ye all right, Major?’ the man asked.

So, he was a major. ‘I think so,’ the major said slowly.

The man turned to talk to a younger, leaner man with lighter hair and a Vandyke beard that didn’t belong on someone so baby-faced. ‘Captain Logan, sir,’ he reported, ‘I think the major’s all right.’

‘Very good, Anderson.’

The major rolled over and drew his knees up under him, preparing to stand.

‘Sir,’ Anderson protested, ‘d’ye really think you should be standing up? The way that horse rolled, your legs...’

The major stood. His legs ached, but they supported him. They weren’t broken, which was good enough for him. In any case, his head felt so bad that he doubted a broken bone would even be noticeable by comparison.

‘Bloody hell,’ Anderson exclaimed. ‘How can you stand up?’

‘I’m all right, Anderson.’ He tried to focus on the bearded officer. ‘Logan, what...?’

‘We broke them, sir,’ the young captain said, quietly and reassuringly. He beamed. ‘You were magnificent, sir. But one of them shot your horse down. When he rolled over on you I feared the worst.’

The major was tempted to ask who ‘they’ were, but some instinct stopped him. He’d said he was all right, and didn’t

want to worry these men who were so concerned about him. 'Well, it isn't the worst. Not for me, anyway. The horse?'

'Neck broken, sir,' Anderson burred.

The major nodded his understanding, though he could barely feel his head move. He could barely feel anything beyond the burning agony that throbbed between his ears. He might not remember what had just happened, but he knew a concussion when he felt one. He turned, and saw the source of the smoke that tainted his every breath.

The flames were visible several miles from the town, casting an angry glow against the smoke overhead. The smell of burning clay as well as wood smoke was already in the air. On the gentle slope leading to the town the earth was churned and damp, and a few injured or dead horses were slumped where they had fallen. A number of boxes, baskets and weapons were scattered around, though there was no sign of bodies.

'Any fatalities?' the major asked.

'Only you, we thought,' Logan said. 'The bandits decided discretion was the better part of valour, and ran for their lives.'

'Better than nothing, I suppose. Lucky we were here.'

'Too late for Qiang-Ling,' Logan said sadly, indicating the town. 'God alone knows where their militia was.'

'Wi' the bandits, probably,' Anderson muttered, just loud enough to be heard. 'Sleekit buggers, they are.'

Logan shook his head. 'No, I don't think so. But they certainly would have been no match for a bandit column that size.'

'Perhaps we should go and ask them,' the major suggested. 'I'll need a new horse anyway.'

'You can take mine,' Logan offered.

'No, that's all right. I think the walk will help me get going again.'

Logan nodded curtly and turned to Anderson. 'Form up the column, and follow us in. I'll go with the major and find him another horse for the journey back to Kwantung.'

‘Yes, sir.’ Anderson walked back to where the major could now make out two horses. He mounted one and led the other by the reins back into the darkness.

Logan handed the major a conical helmet with a *pagri* wrapped around it, and no plume in the space for one. There was a fist-sized dent in it.

‘It looks like I feel,’ the major said, cracking a slight smile. It stung to do so. He decided to carry the helmet under his arm, doubting that it would fit well on his head anyway.

A nice soft pillow would fit him better, but he had no idea how many miles it was back to his quarters in Kwantung.

Even before the major and Captain Logan entered the town they could hear the wails of women and children, who were pawing frantically at the rums, over the sound of the fires. The major had to stop to fashion a rough mask out of cloth and tie it round his mouth and nose. He had no illusions that it would keep the smell of smoke and charred flesh out of his nostrils, but with any luck it should prevent his throat being scorched into uselessness.

The town gates were off their hinges and lying askew on the road. Flames cast enough light for the major to see his way by, but at the same time created dancing shadows among the debris that constantly strove to trick and beguile him into taking a tumble.

A chain of men, women and children was hauling pails of water through the streets to the buildings where the fires still burnt brightest. Some of the men wore the robes and basket-like hats of the town’s militia. They glared at the two British officers as if blaming them. The looks were forceful enough for the major to start feeling guilty, even though he knew his troops hadn’t done anything.

They also hadn’t arrived in time to prevent this happening.

‘It looks as if we didn’t do much good here today, Captain.’

Logan looked uncomfortable. In fact, he looked very much as the major felt. ‘We did drive off the bandits, sir.’

‘Too late.’

'The town has a militia. One has to wonder where they were.'

'Protecting their families, like any sensible men,' the major theorised.

A militiaman wearing a slightly finer uniform than the other men was directing operations, and the major went over to him.

'Excuse me,' he began, in the Chinese he'd been learning since he was posted here. He got no further.

'Where were your troops when these barbarians were burning my town?'

'We were engaging the bandits outside. This is very much an internal Chinese matter -'

'Pah,' the officer spat. '*Gwailo* lies and excuses as usual. If you're going to colonise a country, you might at least make a show of instilling order.'

'Look, Captain -' Logan began, but the major cut him off with a gesture.

'We only want to help,' he said to the militiaman. 'We've lost some horses, and will need replacements. I have fifty men coming who can help fight these fires in exchange.'

The officer grimaced. He clearly wanted to spurn the offer of help, but was not stupid enough to risk his people's lives by doing so. 'All right. There are horses in a corral at the end of that street.' He pointed. 'Their stable has burnt down, so we can't look after them anyway. You can take them. Ride them, bury them, eat them, do what you like.'

'Thank you.' The major turned to Logan. 'Get the men fallen in: fire-fighting parties. It's going to be a long night.' The moon crossed the sky at its usual stately pace, the stars shifting around it. As it sank lower, so did the flames in Qiang-Ling. The smoke cleared from the air and the major was able to find a sheltered spot in which to rest, in the hope that his head would stop feeling like a gong that had just been struck.

As he looked up at the rising glow in the east for one last time before closing his eyes, he felt a peculiar sensation. It was a shiver under the skin, and a tingle in the bones -

someone walking over his grave. He felt for a confused moment as if he had seen this dawn before, and was doomed to repeat it.

Then his thoughts broke up, and dissolved into the soft oblivion of sleep.

Ian Chesterton stood in the TARDIS doorway and looked out at the pre-dawn tint of the eastern sky. He had managed to rest well, before dressing in casual slacks, rollneck and jacket. Barbara had found herself sensible shoes to go with a plain trouser suit and Vicki wore baggy trousers and an oversized sweater.

The Doctor himself had exchanged his usual frock coat for a similar, but double-breasted variant that Ian supposed would be a little warmer in the cool morning air. He rubbed his hands together. 'Now, let's see where we are, eh?'

'Don't the Ship's instruments tell us?' Vicki asked. She circled the console. 'I mean, surely there's a navigational panel on here that can read where it is.'

'Of course there is, child,' the Doctor snapped. 'But it is rather generic, concerning itself more with which planet the Ship is on than a specific geographical location.'

'That's a bit silly, isn't it?'

'Yes, child, precisely so.'

He ushered Vicki and Barbara out, past Ian, and turned to lock the door behind him.

'But it makes things that bit more interesting, doesn't it?' he asked cheerfully. He pointed in an apparently random direction with his walking cane. 'Yes, much more interesting than reading a dial.'

Vicki laughed and moved on ahead. Ian exchanged a look with Barbara. The old boy was incorrigible, it seemed. Her expression mirrored his, agreeing with his judgement.

'Shall we promenade?' he asked, offering her his arm with a grin.

'Thank you, kind sir,' she said, with the kind of seriousness that couldn't be serious.

She linked her arm in his, and together they followed the Doctor and Vicki.

Behind them, only a contented, wary vibration like the purring of a sleeping cat remained.

5

The early-morning walk was pleasant, and felt both relaxing and invigorating at the same time. Thankfully it wasn't tiring, and Barbara enjoyed it. It was just one of those times when everything was right: a peaceful place, fresh air that was neither too warm nor too cold and good company.

The company was important: the Doctor, always ready with an explanation or some surprisingly youthful enthusiasm; Vicki's excitement at the new form of travel was infectious and appreciated; most of all, there was Ian at her side. It seemed so natural for him to be there that it felt as if he had always been with her.

The road wasn't well travelled at this hour, and the four of them saw only two other people. Two men - a father and son, judging by their resemblance to each other - passed them, walking in the other direction. The pair looked curiously at the time travellers, but didn't say anything.

They were Chinese, and wore loose trousers and long Chinese-style shirts, which at least provided a clue to where the TARDIS had landed. The two men had shaved foreheads, and their hair was tied back into long queues that fell down past the napes of their necks. Barbara recognised this as a style worn in the past, but over several centuries so there was no way she could narrow it down to a likely year.

The smell of salt water, oil and fish rose in the air along with the sun. Wherever they were Barbara knew it had to be coastal, or perhaps an estuary. The road ahead breasted a ridge and, as they climbed, the smell became stronger.

As light spread towards them she saw that she was right. A city sprawled across the long east-west curve of a wide river, which then flowed south, and widened still further, on the far side of the city. Most of the buildings were low and brick-

built, with wooden or tiled roofs. Many were enclosed in their own little courtyards and compounds.

Barbara couldn't help thinking it was an organic, growing city. It was solid at its heart, but new buildings spored out towards its edges like a moss thriving on the moist side of a rock.

Larger, more impressive buildings flowered here and there. A rather Gothic-looking cathedral rose by the riverside, and behind it, a few streets further inland, there was what looked like a mosque. On a low hill to the left, overlooking the city, there was a dark pagoda at least five storeys high. A wall had been set up around it, patrolled by men in uniform, though none of them was manning the cannon dotted around the walls. There were more walled fortresses on the other islands that dotted the river here and there.

Off in the distance there was a shipyard. All the ships Barbara could see, either on the water or in the construction yards, had sails, though there were also some vessels with funnels belching steam. 'Doctor,' she said, 'the design of those ships is too primitive for the 1960s.'

'No, no, you're quite right,' the Doctor admitted. 'The late nineteenth century, I should say.'

'I think so too,' Barbara agreed. 'And that tower looks Chinese.'

She looked back at the dark pagoda, and tried to remember what China had been like when the TARDIS had brought them there before. Barbara Wright the Coal Hill schoolteacher would have had no trouble recalling a trip to the far side of the world, but Barbara the traveller in time and space had seen so many wonders that a lot of them had stopped being wonders. It saddened her for a moment.

'I think you're right, Barbara,' Ian said behind her. 'We passed two Chinamen earlier.'

'Yes, wearing queues. I think they stopped that before the war, didn't they? But they'd certainly still be wearing them in the nineteenth century.' She kicked herself mentally. 'I wish we'd asked them where we were.'

‘Well, my dear,’ the Doctor said, ‘I’m sure we can find someone to tell us both the place and the date down there, couldn’t we? And perhaps something for breakfast. I’m rather peckish, I must say.’

‘Me too,’ Ian admitted. ‘And it’s not like this city is likely to be full of Daleks or radiation. It’s only the Victorian era.’

‘It could be the Boxer rebellion,’ Barbara reminded her companions. But she doubted it. The city looked too peaceful for that, and some instinct told her that they had arrived there earlier than the time of the Boxers.

As they made their way into the city they began to pass more people and receive more glances. Nearer the waterfront the streets were crowded, and uncomfortably so. Barbara hated this as much as she hated rush hour in London - the flow of people bouncing her around like the ball in a roulette wheel. She held on to Ian’s hand, so that she wouldn’t be pulled away by the pedestrian current and then have to spend hours looking for him.

The time travellers attracted a few curious, suspicious or downright hostile glances, but most people ignored them. Barbara suspected that the glances - the curious ones, at least - were more for their clothes than their race. There were other white people around, mostly dressed in suits or uniforms she recognised as being nineteenth century. There were priests - Jesuits, by the style of their clothes - and some French and American soldiers, though most of the soldiers were in Victorian-style British uniforms. Some of the Chinese also wore uniforms, and flattened hats like upturned baskets. She didn’t know whether they were the local army or the police. While the western soldiers were either armed with rifles or unarmed and presumably off duty, the uniformed Chinese were all bearing swords, with only the occasional pistol.

‘The 1860s, I think,’ Barbara said to Ian.

‘The uniforms look about that sort of era,’ he agreed.

‘Too early for the Boxers, but probably not too long after the Opium Wars.’

Barbara found herself smiling. Someone had once said that the past was another country, but she didn't think they realised it was the sort of country that it would be rewarding to mount an expedition to. No doubt the idea of said country being suitable for a holiday was also not intended.

'Your assessment of this place is quite right, I should say,' the Doctor chipped in. He smiled and chuckled. 'Vicki has spotted an inn, where we might find both some sustenance and confirmation of what the time and place are.'

He pointed with his walking cane to a relatively high building on a corner.

There Vicki, ever the enthusiastic explorer, was waiting for them. Barbara sometimes wondered whether she and Ian ever also seemed to the Doctor's eyes like the excitable children of a holidaying family. She hoped not, but suspected this was a vain hope. She felt settled here, in the past again, and, after all, there were worse things than being enthusiastic or passionate about what one did with one's time.

Guangzhou might be eighteen hundred years later than Rome, but it didn't seem to be much more advanced. Considering how different the Roman period was to her own time, Vicki had thought that with technology developing over the years the differences between the two cities would have been far more noticeable.

She had expected to see vehicles powered by internal combustion engines, but there were none around. She wasn't quite sure whether this was because they hadn't been invented yet, or whether there simply weren't any in the city. In any case she wasn't complaining; there was plenty to see and do, by the looks of things.

Confident that the others would stay close behind her she had allowed herself to wander, admiring the banners and paper lanterns that hung above the streets, and the bolts of silk in shops hidden under bright awnings. Though there were no cars, the streets were far from empty and she found herself winding between people, obstacles and vehicles under

more organic power. There were bicycles, and rickshaws, and horses, and chickens, and although there were men carrying rifles as well as swords, nothing else seemed to have advanced.

If anything, the smell was worse than it had been in Rome, as if man's knowledge of sewerage had somehow regressed rather than advanced. It wasn't all bad, though. There was a smell of food that was pulling at her like a black hole pulled at, well, anything and everything. True, there were other, less palatable smells as well - of animals, filth, incense, wood smoke and a lot of other things she couldn't identify because they no longer existed in her time. None of them deflected her attention away from the scent of spices and frying oil.

It was coming from a three-storey brick and wood building on the next corner. Chinese characters hung from a sign, and were painted on lamps that hung both inside and out. The carved shutters over the windows were open and folded back, so Vicki could see almost all of the ground floor and first floor.

The place looked well populated, with trays of steaming bowls on many tables and laughing faces enjoying their contents. A couple of girls in tight, if well-worn, silks were ferrying bottles and mugs around. Somewhere at the back of the ground floor a man was chopping something. He was larger than anyone else Vicki could see in the building.

She turned, and for one gut-tightening moment thought she'd lost the others. Then she saw the Doctor's white hair, and Ian and Barbara a few yards behind him. She ran back to the Doctor. 'I've found breakfast. An inn or something. It looks well filled, and most of the customers seem clean, so it's probably a good choice.'

The Doctor smiled, chuckling to himself. 'We're becoming quite the little travel expert aren't we? Hmm? Yes, that's very good. Very good indeed.'

He looked around for Ian and Barbara, and stepped over to them to pass on the news. Vicki turned again, and this time went through the doors of the building.

The ground floor of the inn was, barring the style of lamps and carvings, much like any other the time travellers had visited in different eras. It had a worn feel, but one that was homely and lived-in rather than tired out. The smell of beer and dark wine was overwhelmed by the smell of spices, frying vegetables and steaming meat.

It was completely irresistible.

The innkeeper was a hawk-faced man with a scarred cheek. When he looked at the travellers one eye moved further than the other, and Vicki suspected the latter was glass. He looked surreptitiously around at his other customers with a troubled expression. Vicki couldn't think why, though she did notice that the murmur of conversation had lessened when they came in.

The Doctor pointed to an empty table with four stools around it, two on either side. 'I suggest we take a seat. I can order for all of us. Whichever province of China this is, I speak the local dialect, of course.'

'Of course,' Ian agreed.

At the sound of his voice, the rest of the inn fell silent. Vicki could feel eyes on her back, and began to wonder if she'd made such a good choice after all. She dismissed the worry; this was a civilised place, a city on Earth. Even if someone here was a criminal, they'd hardly start trouble in a public place.

Ian and Barbara sat on one side of the table, opposite the Doctor and Vicki. The Doctor went over to the man with the glass eye and spoke to him. While he was there Vicki looked around. There were a couple of white men at another table, but they were concentrating on their meal. Everyone else was looking at the time travellers' table.

It was more specific than that, Vicki realised after a moment: they were looking at Ian. Their expressions ranged from surprise through curiosity to indignation, and they were all looking at Ian.

The Doctor returned, flanked by a waitress carrying a tray of *dim sum*. He didn't seem to notice the looks. 'Help yourselves,' he said, taking his stool.

Vicki took his walking cane while he got himself settled.

‘Thank you, child.’

Vicki felt more comfortable sitting with the Doctor rather than with Ian and Barbara. It wasn't that she disliked them - they were smart enough, considering they came from a time not much evolved beyond this one, and they were good people. It was just that she didn't feel at ease being in their way. They were so much a couple - almost a gestalt entity, she sometimes thought - that she felt like an intruder when she was around. Or sometimes just like a fifth wheel.

Vicki suddenly realised how hungry she really was. The food machine in the TARDIS seemed able to supply any amount of nutrition, and could even manage the taste of real food, but it wasn't really real. It didn't have the right texture, and you certainly couldn't sit and have a chat over a meal the size of a chocolate bar, even if it did taste like steak and eggs.

She helped herself to spring rolls, noodles, steamed dumplings and anything else her arms could reach. As she had found in Rome, the food in the past tasted better, or at least more real, than the food of her time.

On the ship to Astra - and even on Earth in her time - everything was engineered and processed to be nutritious and healthy, but it all tasted much the same. She looked over at Ian and Barbara, who were chatting and relaxed as they picked at the buffet. Though they came from a time not much more advanced than this one, she envied them the food they ate. Healthy or not, at least it was worthy of the name.

‘This is excellent,’ Barbara exclaimed.

‘Much better than anything out of the food machine,’ Ian agreed, echoing Vicki's thought.

‘And just what is wrong with the food machine?’ the Doctor asked haughtily, though Vicki could tell from his tone that he was being playful rather than truly offended.

‘Nothing, Doctor,’ Ian said, doing a good job of faking ruefulness. ‘But you have to admit that nutrition bars, however well flavoured, are no match for the real thing.’

Vicki got the feeling their banter was an old and favourite game for both of them.

‘Oh, aren’t they, young man? The Ship does have a kitchen, you know - or perhaps I should say a galley. If I were to collect ingredients, perhaps you’d care to do the cooking from now on, eh?’

Ian looked tempted. ‘Well, I’m no cordon bleu, but I know how to fry an egg -’

‘Chesterton!’ a voice from a nearby table exclaimed.

It was a man with the waxy face of a drinker, and the stained clothes of one whose drinking gets less accurate with every cup of wine. His face seemed to be caught in a battle between the expressions of a jackpot winner and a crash survivor. The whole populace of the restaurant looked at the travellers.

‘Yes,’ Ian said cautiously. ‘My name’s Chesterton.’

‘Chesterton,’ the half-drunk man said again.

Vicki was astonished. ‘How did he know your name?’

Ian could only shrug and look baffled as the drunkard put his massive knuckles on the table and pushed himself up from his stool. He came over, almost managing to walk in a straight line.

‘You must have more guts than we thought, to come in here with only an old man and a couple of your *gwailo* whores for company - or less brains than we thought.’

‘Look friend,’ Ian began tartly, ‘I don’t care what you think you’ve got against me, but if you don’t take back what -’

His protest ended in a solid smack of drunken fist against speaking mouth.

The old temple off the Baiyun road didn’t look nearly as spooky in the morning light. It was just a tumbledown old building, with grass for a floor, and plants and flowers covering the walls. Fei-Hung felt more than a little foolish. Perhaps he had been tricked by a shadow or the movement of trees in the wind?

That’s what his father would say, anyway. He was sure of that. But he was also sure the wind didn’t make the sound

he had heard, and neither did it cast a flashing light. There were certainly no lamps in the old ruin.

‘Where were you, exactly?’ his father asked.

Fei-Hung pointed to an arch. ‘Through there.’

Wong-sifu immediately made for the arch and, after a moment’s hesitation, Fei-Hung followed. He wasn’t sure whether he was expecting to see anything or not. The daylight had banished most of the fear, and even if there had been anything demonic, surely it would have returned to one of the hells by dawn.

Fei-Hung stepped through the arch - and froze, a chill trickling down his spine. The gate that had appeared from nowhere was still there. ‘There it is.’

Kei-Ying moved closer to it, but Fei-Hung stayed where he was for a moment. In the light he could see that it was more like a kind of wooden box - the size of two or three coffins stuck together - that had appeared in the gap in the wall. ‘You see, I told you!’

His father gave him a withering look, which mellowed after a moment. ‘This box is new, but it’s nothing supernatural.’ He pointed to some writing above the doors and on one of the panels. ‘This writing is in the European alphabet. It probably belongs to the compound on Xamian Island, or one of the companies in town.’

‘Then what’s it doing out here?’

Kei-Ying stepped back, studying the box. ‘I don’t know. It’s out of the way, but they haven’t hidden it or covered it up. It could be abandoned, I suppose. Or some sort of small supply cabinet for columns nearing the city. I wonder how heavy it is; the noise you heard could have been some kind of steam-driven traction-engine that was carrying it.’

Fei-Hung shook his head. ‘Nothing carried it,’ he insisted. ‘It appeared out of nothing. I saw it,’ he added emphatically. He knew it sounded insane, but he also knew he wasn’t given to flights of fancy, and he hoped his father knew this too.

After a moment Kei-Ying nodded. ‘I believe you believe that’s what you saw.’ He turned back to the box and made to pat its side. Instantly, he drew his hand back. ‘What the -?’

'Father?' Fei-Hung was immediately on guard, though he wasn't sure what he was guarding against.

'It... tingles.'

'Tingles?'

Wong-sifu nodded.

Gingerly, Fei-Hung put out a hand towards the wooden door. There was a strange feeling in his fingertips, as if the flesh was trying to ripple against the bone inside. He jumped back. 'Magic?'

'Maybe... The man who owns the Hidden Panda does deals of some kind with one of the Englishmen at Xamian. Perhaps he'll know something about this.'

Kei-Ying turned on his heel and marched out of the temple. Fei-Hung was glad to follow.

It didn't take long for them to return to the city. They came in past the docks this time in order to have a shorter walk to the Hidden Panda. As they neared it they could hear shouts, and the occasional crash of pottery or furniture. People in the street were looking towards the junction where the Hidden Panda stood.

Fei-Hung hoped the trouble wasn't there; his father's friend was almost certainly a good man simply by virtue of being his father's friend, and Fei-Hung didn't want such a person to be hurt. He started running, his father matching him stride for stride.

Through the open framework of the ground floor Fei-Hung could see a fight going on. The inn was in uproar. Labourers and merchants alike were struggling together in a knot of bodies in the middle of the floor.

Two hefty men - dock workers, perhaps - were restraining an older white man. A white girl was trying to pull them away from him, while a white woman was clawing at the knot of men trying to break them up. A few other men dotted around were using the chaos to settle private scores, or just joining in for fun.

Fei-Hung ducked to avoid a stool that was thrown through the door as he entered. Behind him, his father caught it and

set it down beside a table. 'Cheng! What's going on here?' Kei-Ying demanded of the innkeeper.

The scar-faced innkeeper paused in his bouncing of a man's head off the bar top, and gestured towards the scrum. 'It's Chesterton -'

He broke off as the man he was grappling with fought back and hit him with a backhanded blow. Cheng's glass eye clattered to the top of the bar and fell to the floor.

Fei-Hung had never met this Chesterton, but he'd heard the name spoken by his father and some of his father's friends. They didn't speak well of him. Fei-Hung wondered what his father would think of this fight if the man he spoke ill of was losing it.

Wong Kei-Ying hesitated momentarily at Cheng's words. Then he turned back to the group of men who were pummelling a figure on the floor. It wasn't a fight - it was a mob beating, pure and simple. Even if the figure was the Chesterton he had heard about, he didn't deserve this. To be beaten in a fair fight, yes; but not this.

Kei-Ying stepped in with a twist here and a sweep of the arms there, and the men stumbled away clutching wrists and shoulders. As the group parted, their fun over, Kei-Ying could see that there was indeed a European man on the floor.

It was Chesterton, just as Cheng had said. His features were the angular sort that westerners found handsome. His torn and stained clothes were strange - perhaps a new fashion from Europe.

There were two women with him. The older of the two was striking-looking and dark-haired. She had been the one trying to break up the gang. A few of the men had scratches on their faces that would take weeks to heal, and Kei-Ying had no doubt her nails had been responsible. Unusually for a European woman, she was wearing trousers instead of thick layers of skirt.

Kei-Ying could tell that the younger woman - no more than a girl, really - was European even before he saw her face. Her hair was an impossibly light shade for either Han or Manchu.

When she turned, he saw she had large eyes and a delicate chin.

He glared at the rabble around the Hidden Panda's ground floor. 'All right. You've had enough fun for one day. He isn't going to shrug this off, and he's probably beyond the point of feeling anything more you could do anyway.'

'Wong-sifu is right,' Cheng said. 'You've done what you wanted and wrecked half my place in the process. Get the hell out of here so I can clean up.'

The drunks and thugs exchanged doubtful looks, then began to relax and filter away. Kei-Ying had noted that mobs had a limited life span. Like firecrackers they blew up with lots of noise and smoke, but the ashes blew away a moment later. He saw the giant, Pang, lurking in the doorway to the kitchen. He was an effective persuader of the doubters among the mob, even without the large cleaver he held. Those who doubted that the fun was really over also left, muttering under their breaths.

'Keep an eye out, Fei-Hung,' Kei-Ying said.

The young man nodded and went to guard the door, while Kei-Ying turned his attention to Chesterton. The man was in a bad way: his cheeks were swollen and his jaw was probably chipped. The sheared-off top of a tooth was lying in a small pool of blood and spit, and his eyelids were too swollen and dark to open. His ears looked as if they had been hacked out of wood.

Kei-Ying knelt and opened Chesterton's jacket and shirt. As he suspected from seeing the kicks that had been delivered, the torso was a mass of bruises, and he wouldn't be surprised to find several ribs broken. At least Chesterton wasn't coughing blood, so no broken bone had pierced a lung.

'He is badly hurt, but should live.' He looked over at Cheng and Pang. 'Cheng, I'll need a cart, and the assistance of Pang.'

'Yes, Wong-sifu,' Cheng agreed. Pang merely nodded.

‘What are you doing with him?’ the older woman asked. She had a bruised cheek, but didn’t seem to have noticed it. Her attention was focused entirely on Chesterton.

‘I will take him to Po Chi Lam, my surgery. There, I can treat his wounds.’

‘You’re a doctor?’

‘A healer.’

She looked him in the eye, judging him. Kei-Ying didn’t look away; he had nothing to hide. She seemed to see that. ‘Thank you.’

‘Yes, thank you, sir, for your kind assistance,’ the old man said.

Silver hair fell around his shoulders, and he was dressed soberly in a black double-breasted frock coat and checked trousers. His face was somehow as haughty as his bearing and at the same time suggestive of wise amusement. ‘We were in considerable trouble, I believe.’

Kei-Ying nodded in agreement. ‘You were... Mr...?’

‘Oh, just Doctor.’

‘Doctor? You’re are a medical man too, then?’

‘Well, that greatly depends.’ The Doctor smiled and clapped his hands. ‘Now, as for your surgery... Po Chi Lam, did you say?’

‘Yes.’

‘And would your name, by any chance, be Master Wong?’

‘Yes it would. Wong Kei-Ying. You’ve heard of me?’

‘But of course, yes! You’re quite highly regarded, you know. Yes, very highly indeed.’

The Doctor seemed to remember his friend and immediately became as professional and curt as Kei-Ying had heard Western doctors could be. ‘The cart is a good idea. We can hardly carry poor Chesterton ourselves. But we must be careful when we lift him up, so as not to disturb any broken ribs or internal injuries.’

‘Don’t worry, Doctor. My son and I also teach *gungfu*, and we’re used to handling such injuries.’

Pang loomed behind the Doctor. 'I've got the cart ready,' he said. He looked down at Chesterton, his expression sad, and shook his head.

6

Barbara knelt at Ian's side, holding his hand almost tightly enough to hear the bones grate against each other. At just such an imagined sound she lessened her grip, flooded with guilt. He was injured enough already.

Barbara couldn't recall ever wanting to hit someone, or hurt a person physically, so when the desire to do so washed through her she didn't recognise it at first. It was a dark tension that started somewhere in the pit of her stomach, and spread upwards and outwards in her blood. Every beat of her pulse carried it a little further.

At first she mistook it for worry, or impatience for Ian to heal. Then she remembered the faces of the men beating him - their sweat-stained skin and gleeful expressions - and knew that feeling her knuckles crack against their cheeks or jaws would relieve that intolerable tension.

She wondered what tensions those men had taken out on Ian, and decided there probably weren't any. She wished she could have done more to fight off the gang. She could see blood under her fingernails where she had scratched at least one of them, but she didn't remember what it had felt like at the time. She wondered if remembering the feeling would make her feel better or worse.

Her fingers throbbed where the nails had been levered up against the thug's skin and bone, but she knew it was nothing compared to what Ian must be going through.

At first she had thought the same as Vicki - the inn was a safe-looking place, and the number of locals and foreigners eating there suggested it served good and healthy fare. Then some of those locals had set upon Ian just, as far as she could see, for being Ian Chesterton.

This in itself was a puzzle. How could they know his name, or who he was? She had asked this several times on the cart

journey here, but nobody had answered. They all either looked at her as though she was mad for not knowing the answer, or dodged the question. It was infuriating enough to make her want to explode. Frankly, it was infuriating enough to make her want to take out her fear and anger on them, and repay them for the beating Ian had taken rather than the help they were offering. It was wrong, and she knew it, but feelings couldn't be helped - they just happened to you, whether you wanted them to or not.

The man who had pulled the mob off Ian had been true to his word and had brought the time travellers to his surgery, if that's what this place was. He wore simple trousers and a shirt, but carried them as well as if they were the uniform of a general. He wore the look comfortably and easily, and Barbara had no doubt that he wasn't putting on an act for anyone's benefit.

His eyes were dark, but were flecked with lighter slivers the way the autumn sunlight falls warmly on to undergrowth in a forest path. They were strong and calm, and he clearly had nothing to prove. He had introduced himself as 'Wong,' to the Doctor. 'Wong Kei-Ying.' The name was vaguely familiar, but Barbara couldn't place it.

The giant cook had brought a cart round to the inn and, with Kei-Ying and his son, had gently carried Ian to it. There was a simple mattress in the cart.

'I brought it from my room,' the giant said quietly. 'Don't forget where it came from.'

'It will be returned within the hour,' Kei-Ying promised him.

Barbara was as mystified by the giant's kindness as she was by the gang's hostility. 'Thank you,' she said. She liked him immediately, though she couldn't say why.

He simply smiled. Then the Wongs, *pere et fils*, boarded the cart, as did the Doctor, Vicki and Barbara herself.

The journey lasted only a few minutes, and took them from the city centre to a reasonable suburb. Various homes and workplaces lined the streets, and Kei-Ying guided the cart into a street with perimeter walls on either side that made it difficult to see what sort of buildings might be beyond them.

One side of the street was taken up with a long white-washed wall, about eight feet high. Above it Barbara could make out tiled roofs, angular but with gentle curves. Halfway along the wall a dark wooden gateway stood twelve feet high. The gates themselves, studded with metal, were the same height as the wall, leaving a gap between them and the top of the wooden frame. Barbara guessed the frame was intended to be decorative rather than a barrier to intruders.

Wong's son jumped down and opened the gates to let the cart through into a space that felt open and airy. A drive paved with flagstones led between two dusty lawns to a wide courtyard of hard-packed earth. On either side there were long, low buildings, separated from the drive by the lawns. The open space was only the size of a large garden, but it felt like a field with room for the air to circulate.

The courtyard fronted an impressive wood and plaster building with two wings on either side of the courtyard, which was edged on three sides by a raised veranda. All the doors and windows were wooden and were carved with intricate patterns. The main double doors in the middle of the central section slid aside and folded away as several men emerged.

'Fei-Hung,' Kei-Ying said to the youth, then rattled off a string of syllables that Barbara couldn't follow. She presumed they were the names of medicines of some kind - herbs, most likely. The young man nodded and ran into the building.

Barbara helped the Doctor, Vicki and Kei-Ying to lift Ian out of the cart. He felt heavier than she had imagined. Under Kei-Ying's direction they brought him into the room where Barbara was now kneeling beside him.

It was a simple room, with several low beds and a polished wooden floor surrounded by dark shelves filled with bowls, cups and scrolls, and all the impedimenta of some esoteric form of medicine. A couple of simple tables bore lamps near the beds, as did some of the thick, black, square wooden beams that supported the ceiling.

Fei-Hung was waiting, his arms overflowing with clay jars and vials, all tightly stoppered and labelled with Chinese characters. Kei-Ying wasted no time in brewing a herbal tea and preparing lotions to dab on to Ian's wounds.

'What are they?' Barbara asked.

'*Tsan go tsui*, to reduce the pain from swelling injuries,' Kei-Ying answered. '*Chi da* to reduce the bruising.'

'These are quite effective natural anti-inflammatories,' the Doctor agreed, reassuringly. 'And these other herbs here, they should be quite effective analgesics.'

Barbara wasn't so sure. 'I'd be happier if we had aspirin available. I'm sure Master Wong knows what he's doing, and that some plants and herbs have some medicinal value -'

'Oh, really?' the Doctor asked. 'What you call aspirin originates from the bark of the willow. You'd be surprised how many natural substances are used or replicated in your modern medicine.'

Finally, Kei-Ying was finished and Barbara had to admit that Ian was breathing more normally and the swellings under his bruises were starting to reduce. 'He will need a few days' rest,' Kei-Ying said, but it will take weeks for the broken bones to heal. Especially the left shin. I have some little skill, but even I cannot force bone to glue itself together overnight.'

The Doctor looked Ian over and seemed satisfied with what he saw. 'Some little skill? Please, Master Wong, don't do yourself down. Your skills are quite remarkable for this day and age. Yes, remarkable. In fact I don't think I could have done better myself.'

'You honour me.'

'Yes, I suppose I do,' the Doctor murmured. 'But we shall have to do something about those ribs and that leg before we can move again.'

Kei-Ying nodded. 'He has quarters at Xamian, of course, but it may be dangerous to move -'

'Xamian, you say? I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about. We've only just arrived here in Guangzhou.'

'Just arrived? But Chesterton has been here for at least a year.'

'That's impossible,' Barbara exclaimed.

'No,' the Doctor said slowly. 'I'm afraid it isn't impossible. Not in the TARDIS.'

He half-closed his eyes, sinking deep into his thoughts the way Barbara liked to sink into a relaxing bath. 'Master Wong, I'm sure you are honest and truthful, and that Chesterton has been here for a year. It would be very difficult to explain, but I must ask you to believe me that he has also just arrived today, and that he has no lodgings at Xamian, wherever that may be.'

Kei-Ying hesitated, then looked back at Ian. 'Then he should stay here tonight.'

'I'll watch over him,' Barbara said.

The Doctor's face softened immediately and he put a hand on her shoulder. 'Of course, Barbara. You will let me know if he wakes up, hmm?'

'Yes, of course.'

'I can stay too,' Vicki volunteered.

'That's very kind of you, child,' the Doctor said quickly, 'but we don't want to crowd Chesterton, now do we?'

Barbara gave the Doctor a look of thanks, willing him to hear the gratitude she wasn't vocalising. He nodded slightly and ushered Vicki out.

'I will check on him in an hour,' Kei-Ying promised. Barbara smiled and nodded. She felt as if she herself was likely to keel over at any moment. All the light in the room seemed to have floated to the top edge of her peripheral vision, and everything she focused on was cloaked in twitchy gloom.

She knelt beside Ian and took his hand. She appreciated Vicki wanting to help, and the fact that the girl cared about her travelling companions, but right now she just wanted to be alone with Ian.

She was able to relax slightly, knowing that something had been done about Ian's injuries, but she couldn't help feeling that while he was unconscious some part of her was blacked out. It was like having a radio on which one of her favourite stations was silent. At the same time she felt, and hoped that

it wasn't just a hope, that he would somehow know that she was there.

Soon, the tension that remained was a dark one that spread out from her stomach. For the first time she could remember, Barbara wanted to hit someone.

Fei-Hung followed Kei-Ying out. His father had done a good job and had made the young man proud to be his son, as he often did. Despite this, Fei-Hung wasn't sure they should have bothered. 'Father, why are we keeping him here? The garrison at Xamian Island has its own doctors -'

'As I told the old man and the women, it could be dangerous to move him right now.' Kei-Ying sounded distracted and distant. 'Fei-Hung, have you met Chesterton before?'

'Not as such. I've seen him from a distance, when he rode by.'

'Didn't he strike you as being a little older than this man? I recall he had more grey in his hair.'

'Yes... Now that you mention it. Could this man be his brother? That would explain why he has no quarters at Xamian.'

Kei-Ying nodded. 'That's what I was thinking.'

Fei-Hung hesitated. 'But, Father, he's still a *gwailo*, still a supporter of the Manchu -' He fell silent as Kei-Ying grabbed his ear. Though he had celebrated his eighteenth birthday, and was taller than his father, he made the appropriate sounds of pain as he allowed Kei-Ying to escort him across the courtyard and out of the main gate.

Without letting go of his son's ear, Kei-Ying pointed at the sign above the gate. 'What does that say?'

'Po Chi Lam, Physician's Surgery.'

'Does it say "except for gwailos"?''

'No, but -'

Kei-Ying released the ear just long enough to give it a clip with his hand, then twisted it again.

'No buts! No exceptions. This Chesterton needs a physician. I am a physician, therefore I will help. You will be a physician too, so the same rule applies to you.' He released his son.

Fei-Hung rubbed his ear. 'I bet their physician wouldn't help you if the situation was reversed.'

'That,' Kei-Ying said patiently, 'is why we should help. If you dislike someone, why would you want to be like him?' He turned to go back inside, then paused to curse. 'I forgot to ask Cheng about that box.'

They had been so completely sidetracked that Fei-Hung hadn't thought to mention it either.

'Just a moment,' he said. 'I have seen those people before! We passed them on the Baiyun road.'

'So we did! And the old man, the Doctor, said they'd just arrived. Perhaps the box is theirs.' Kei-Ying nodded to himself. 'I shall ask them, at dinner.'

'What about Cheng's cart?'

'Tell Jiang to take it back to the Hidden Panda.'

'Jiang?' It seemed a rather menial task for another teacher.

'Jiang.'

7

Once the last bolt was thrown, and the shutters closed against the darkness outside, Cheng relaxed a bit, letting out a long breath. Then he set about looking for his eye.

He found it under the table nearest the door, and picked off the bits of grit and sawdust that had adhered to it. He looked at it, reluctant to put it back in after its journey around the floor. For the first time in his life, he felt a little guilty about not keeping the place any cleaner than a drunken dock worker was likely to notice.

The broom in the corner looked welcoming for a change. 'Maybe tomorrow,' he told it. He went back behind the bar and used his teeth to pull the stopper out of a bottle of Kao-liang. He poured some of the liquor into a mug and dropped his glass eye into it, rolling it around to clean it. Then he dried the eye off carefully, put it back in its socket - it stung,

despite his efforts to remove the alcohol - and drank the liquor, as he didn't see any point in wasting it.

He lifted the bottle and took it through to the kitchen, where the giant Pang was trying to chisel off the crust on one of the overused woks. 'Drink?' he offered. Pang took a couple of swallows from the bottle.

'What a day,' Cheng sighed.

'Almost like the old days.'

'Yes, almost. Except that there was no profit in it. It'll cost us to replace those chairs.'

There was a rapping on the shutters next to the door, a simple long-short long-short code. Cheng opened the door and let in a wiry, white man with a squashed nose and weathered face. He wore simple local clothes, but couldn't disguise his military bearing or walk.

'You're late,' Cheng told him in heavily accented English.

'Captain Logan had me putting a couple of men through punishment drills as soon as we got back from Qiang-Ling. He's a wee shite, that one. The kinna man whose mouth bleeds every twenty-eight days, if ye take my meaning.'

'Hardly the way for a soldier to talk about his superior officer?'

Sergeant Major Anderson shrugged the comment off. 'I've been in the army since he was naught but a babe in arms, and I'll be there when he's retired to some soft desk job in London.' He looked towards the door to the cellar. 'Now, d'ye have something for me?'

Cheng nodded, happy that the small talk was over. He lit a small lamp and led Anderson down into the spiced depths of the cellar. The space under the inn was filled with boxes and barrels, and the occasional rat that Cheng hoped would have the sense to keep out of the way. Apart from food and drink, there were small piles of lanterns in the corners and even a dancer's lion costume.

Cheng led the Scotsman to a small pile of crates and patted the topmost one. 'A Russian ship came into the docks yesterday. This was on board.'

He put the lamp down, pulled a knife from his belt and levered the top off the crate. There were bottles inside it nestling in straw. Cheng lifted one out and tossed it to Anderson, who caught it easily.

The sergeant major pulled the stopper out and sniffed. 'Smooth stuff,' he said admiringly. He put the stopper back in. 'How many?'

'Just what you see here. Six crates, twelve bottles each.'

Anderson nodded thoughtfully and Cheng could see the wheels turning behind his eyes, the beads sliding along the mental abacus to work out what to offer in exchange.

'Three boxes of rifle ammunition.'

'Five,' Cheng countered immediately - through force of habit. Three would have been fine.

'Four.'

'Done.'

'Deliver them to the scullery at Xamian in the morning. Your boxes of bullets will be in the linens as usual.'

'That's fine.' Cheng led Anderson back up to the kitchen, where Pang was counting up stock. 'How is Megan?'

'Och, she's fine. I had a letter from her this week. She's settling in to her new school nicely, she says.'

'That is good to hear,' Cheng said, and meant it. He'd never met this Megan, but she seemed like a good person, from what Anderson had told him. They shook hands on the deal. 'Tomorrow morning it is.'

Then Anderson was gone, and Pang paused in his work. 'Jiang's waiting for you upstairs.'

Cheng groaned, but ascended to the cleaner, private dining level. The furnishings here were much the same as on the ground floor, but a few watercolours hung on the walls and every table was partitioned into its own little booth. Here the slightly better-off clientele could eat and discuss business without having to look over their shoulders at a crowd.

Jiang was indeed waiting. He was tall and thin, with a slightly shaggy moustache, and wore a white tunic over black trousers. His clothes may have been plain, but they were well tailored. 'Jiang-sifu,' Cheng said. 'What can I do for you?'

‘Lei-Fang has called a meeting. On the junk.’
‘Let me get my coat.’

The junk was a large, two-masted ship that could slide over the Pearl River quietly and steadily, as placid as a swan. Only a couple of sailors were visible on deck, doing whatever sailors did with ropes and suchlike. Cheng had never been to sea and, on a river, preferred a boat he could row himself.

He and Jiang had ridden in a wagon to the northwest of the city, to a small dock where a ferryman was waiting with a low, wide boat. It had taken a further half-hour to reach the place where the junk was moored, and Cheng had passed the time by telling Jiang about the day’s hassles. Jiang seemed amused, which made Cheng wonder whether telling him had been such a good idea.

Then, as the setting sun enriched the sky ahead, they had reached the junk. It sat high on the water, its sails glowing in the late afternoon light, its planking the colour of pale tea.

The ferryman guided the boat in under the shadow of the junk, and one of the sailors let down a rope ladder. Cheng and Jiang quickly scrambled up it. At the top, Cheng looked down and saw the ferryman push the boat away and glide across to the near shore to wait.

Cheng stepped down on to the main deck and ducked through a low door. To his surprise, Lei-Fang was waiting in the companionway outside an ornate gilded door. He was a little older than Cheng and Jiang, but he seemed to have aged twenty years since Cheng last saw him barely a month ago. He still wore his militia uniform, which surprised Cheng as these meetings were supposed to be covert.

‘Some sort of emergency?’ Cheng asked.

‘I’m not sure. Something strange is happening.’

‘Strange?’

‘You’ll see.’ Lei-Fang sounded as worn and worried as he looked.

Cheng didn’t like this at all.

Lei-Fang knocked on the door. ‘Enter,’ a voice called out. And they did.

The room inside was fit for a palace - a far cry from the simple captain's cabin, strewn with charts and scrolls, of Cheng's last visit. Now the chamber was filled with ornate lamps and statuary, and the most expensive furniture and carpets he had ever seen. At the far end was a low dais.

Cheng stopped short as he saw the three men on the raised area. They were all strangers to him; the familiar faces he had served with for the last couple of years weren't there.

All three men had short hair, and none of them had shaved their foreheads. One man was sitting, firm yet relaxed. His hair was grey, as was his wispy beard. The other two men stood flanking him. One was lean, with an angular, handsome face. The other was squat, almost as wide at the shoulders as he was tall, his face almost square.

They were complete strangers, yet somehow Cheng recognised them. He couldn't believe his eye. Those three faces were burnt into his consciousness in a way that even his father's face was not. They weren't dressed in the robes of monks any more, but he recognised them as if he had last seen them yesterday, not two years ago.

The abbot leant closer to him. His eyes didn't glow today, but Cheng suddenly felt as if he knew what it was like to be a haunch of beef in the hands of a butcher assessing the grain before slicing the meat.

'I know you, don't I?' the abbot asked.

Terrified, Cheng nearly blurted out 'yes'. He bit his tongue in time and shook his head. He thanked all the gods and ancestors he knew that he didn't seem to be as important to the abbot as the abbot had been to him. Then he remembered that he had grown his moustache since their last meeting, and that he had no glass eye back then, just a patch over the socket.

The abbot didn't blink, even though he held Cheng's gaze for a full minute. 'Perhaps you have delivered reports to me before.'

'...I don't think so,' Cheng replied. Then he blurted out, 'Who are you?'

‘I am your superior. You may call me Lord, or Master.’ The abbot Cheng remembered from nearly two years ago spread his hands to either side. ‘These are my generals. You will call them General, or Sir.’ He smiled, not unkindly but with steel. ‘Now kneel before your lord.’

The abbot watched as Zhao and Gao moved off the dais to flank Lei-Fang, Jiang and Cheng. He had never seen the latter pair before, as far as he could remember, but Lei-Fang had told him who would be attending. A servant came in with an urn of tea.

The abbot relaxed in his favourite seat. It was lacquered wood, padded with velvet. Everyone knelt until he spoke. ‘Be seated, please.’

The visitors took plush seats of their own.

‘It has come to my attention that there is a certain amount of dissent among the ranks.’ The abbot smiled, and enjoyed the way the three men looked even more nervous when he did so. ‘Perhaps “confusion” would be a better word than “dissent”? I gather that there are some in the Black Flag who are uncertain whether merely to campaign against the Manchu, to join the Manchu and campaign against the *gwailos*, or to campaign against everyone who isn’t Black Flag.’

‘There are factions, my Lord, it is true,’ Jiang agreed.

‘Quite so,’ said the abbot. ‘The answer, of course, is simple. The Black Flag should campaign against whomever its sovereign lord tells it to. Loyalty and obedience are mortal enemies of confusion - and powerful, invulnerable enemies they are.’ He looked towards the tea servant and snapped his fingers. ‘Refreshments.’

The servant bowed hurriedly and scooted forward with a trolley. Instead of cups and snacks a young buck deer, the size of a large dog, was slumped across it. In the place of its left ear, and the bone under it, there was a fist-sized hole caked with dried blood.

The abbot watched the reactions of his audience carefully. Cheng was almost soiling himself with fright. That was good.

Jiang looked baffled and his eyes darted around as if seeking an exit. Lei-Fang simply looked stunned.

'Now,' the abbot said, 'what do you think of this fine suckling pig?' Nobody dared to say anything, so he turned to the servant. 'It is cooked thoroughly, isn't it?'

'Yes, my Lord,' the servant said stiffly. He didn't take his eyes off the floor of the cabin.

'There, you hear? Cooked to perfection.' The abbot slipped a knife from his belt. 'There's more than enough pork here for all of us.'

'My Lord,' Lei-Fang began hesitantly, 'I see no pork. Only a deer -'

Zhao's fist slammed into the side of Lei-Fang's head, once, then again and again. When Lei-Fang had been reduced to twitching insensibility the abbot held up a hand, staying Zhao's next blow. 'You see? Confusion. But it is easily dealt with. Zhao, it would appear that Lei-Fang's eyes lie to him and lead him into confusion. It would also seem that his nose is useless as to smelling the aroma of cooking, and his tongue is loose enough to spread this confusion, through, I'm sure, no fault of his own. So, to protect him from any further embarrassment, relieve him of those unnecessary and unreasonable things.'

Zhao nodded curtly and drew his dagger. Cheng studiously looked out of the window, visibly trying not to be sick, while Jiang watched, his mouth open, as Zhao plucked out Lei-Fang's left eye with the tip of the blade.

The abbot cut into the side of the deer with his knife, parting the ribs with a cracking and scraping that was music to his ears. He also enjoyed the screams that came from Lei-Fang when the pain woke him.

By the time Zhao had dealt with the right eye and the nose, the abbot had reached his prize. He pushed his hand into the tight chest of the animal and pulled its heart free. As Zhao sliced through Lei-Fang's tongue and tossed it aside the abbot bit into the heart, savouring the gelid, dead blood that was trapped within, and the life and strength it carried with it.

He swallowed, and held the heart out towards Cheng and Jiang. 'Pork?'

Cheng found his voice first, though it seemed to be swimming up through vomit that desperately needed to be freed. 'Thank you, my Lord, no. Your chef has done too fine a job for it to be wasted on a humble innkeeper like myself.'

Jiang smiled weakly. 'I already had *yum cha* before boarding. But it is a roast worthy of an emperor, my Lord.'

The abbot relaxed, taking another bite of the heart. The pair had learnt their lesson, and were clearly worthy of the love he had for them and the people. 'Good. Cheng, your supply of ammunition must continue.'

'It will, my Lord,' Cheng squeaked.

'Oh, I know it will.' The abbot relaxed, putting Lei-Fang's mewling out of his mind and enjoying the respect that radiated towards him from Cheng and Jiang. 'I know.'

CHAPTER TWO

The Dead and the Deadly

I

There was a small shrine at the back of the main hall at Po Chi Lam, and there Fei-Hung was burning what looked to Barbara like bank notes. Offerings of food were laid out as well, but these only reminded her of the table at which Ian had been attacked. The Doctor and Kei-Ying were waiting for her in the hall with Vicki, looks of concern on their faces.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

Did they know something she didn’t? She wasn’t a medical person, and knew she wouldn’t be able to recognise a skull fracture, or any number of other potentially fatal results of a beating.

‘Chesterton is very sick,’ Kei-Ying told her. ‘Internal bleeding, and perhaps infection of the blood.’

Barbara couldn’t believe her ears. She refused to believe it.

‘I am treating him as best I can,’ Kei-Ying said, ‘but the broken bones will not heal quickly.’

‘No,’ the Doctor murmured, ‘I don’t suppose they will without rather more advanced medical techniques than you have here. Oh, I don’t mean to belittle your talent, Master Wong, but the techniques I’m thinking of are far in advance of either yours, or western medicine in this century.’

‘This century?’ Kei-Ying looked as if he wanted to back away, and Barbara couldn’t help but sympathise.

‘Barbara,’ the Doctor said, ‘do you think you could find your way back to the Ship?’

‘I think so... why?’ A thought occurred to her and made her bristle. ‘If you think you can get me out of the way while Ian-’

‘There are no antibiotic drugs in this century,’ the Doctor reminded her pointedly, ‘but there are some medicines in the

TARDIS, of both your century and beyond.’ His voice softened. ‘With them, I am sure that Chesterton will recover fully, I promise you.’

‘I see.’ Could it be true? It was a silly question - she knew for a fact that the TARDIS was filled to the gunwales with all manner of modern and futuristic gubbins - but fear about Ian’s condition bred doubts in even her most solid bastions of certainty.

‘TARDIS?’ Kei-Ying echoed.

‘Our... conveyance,’ the Doctor said. ‘It would appear as a large, blue wooden box with a lamp on top of it.’

‘With writing in white above the door, and on one panel of the door? With small glass windows?’

‘Yes.’ The Doctor looked as surprised as Barbara felt. ‘Have you seen it?’

‘My son said he saw it appear out of thin air. I examined it this morning and thought it might belong to the English at Xamian. Do you mean it is yours?’

‘Yes, indeed!’

The Doctor turned back to Barbara. ‘There is a first-aid cabinet in the wall beside the food machine,’ he said. ‘In it are some antibiotic drugs and a machine that looks rather like a solid, wide paintbrush with lights and buttons. This is a kind of bone-regenerator. It will knit broken bones together in a matter of minutes.’

‘And we can use these on Ian?’ Relief washed over her, even though the items were still back in the Ship. Just knowing about them was more reassuring than all Kei-Ying’s efforts, though Barbara would never be so insensitive as to say so aloud.

‘Yes, my dear, we can. But first I shall need someone to go and fetch them. I would rather not be away from Chesterton in his present condition.’

‘I’ll go, of course.’

‘I thought you would.’ The Doctor handed her the TARDIS key.

The touch of it felt strange, and Barbara wasn’t sure whether this was because it was the key to something alien,

or because she was starting to feel dizzy and sick. If Ian hadn't needed help, she would have just lain down somewhere and cried herself to sleep. But then, if Ian hadn't needed help she wouldn't have been feeling this way in the first place. The key looked like a perfectly ordinary Yale one on the end of a black ribbon.

The Doctor's hand closed over Barbara's with surprising firmness and reassurance. 'I'm worried about Ian too,' he said softly. 'And about you as well. You look as if you could just topple over and pass out at any moment, and that's not good, now, is it?'

'That sounds very much like how I feel,' Barbara admitted.

'There's really nothing to worry about, you know.' The Doctor smiled kindly and caught her eye. 'When you bring me that first-aid kit from the TARDIS Ian will be as right as rain, so you can start feeling rather more like your old self, eh?'

Barbara nodded. Unexpectedly, she did feel better. Her head seemed to be clearer and the nausea in her stomach had gone.

Kei-Ying had remained calm and impassive throughout the conversation, but now he nodded to himself. 'My son can guide you. He will also protect you if necessary.'

'Thank you, Master Wong,' the Doctor said. 'I'm sure it won't be necessary, but it is most appreciated.'

Vicki looked towards the little shrine. 'Can I go too?'

The Doctor looked at her quizzically for a moment, then said, 'Of course, child. Of course. Now let's get you ready, hmm?'

'I'll speak to Fei-Hung,' Kei-Ying told them, and went over to the shrine.

'I'll collect some fruit and water for the journey,' Vicki said. She too left, and the Doctor and Barbara were alone.

'I'm surprised, Doctor, that you're allowing Vicki to go. It's nearly dark, for one thing.'

The Doctor brushed Barbara's comment away. 'It's only natural that she should want to go. The child is a born

explorer, in case you hadn't noticed. She'll be keen to see new times and new places.'

His features softened and, if Barbara wasn't mistaken, became almost admiring.

'You see something of yourself in that?' she asked.

'What? Oh, I -' The Doctor stopped pretending to be surprised. 'Yes, yes, in many ways I do. And something of Susan too,' he added sadly.

Barbara understood what he meant. 'It's natural that you'd miss your granddaughter. Anyone would miss a child or grandchild when they leave home at last.'

It was a judicious turn of phrase, and the Doctor clearly knew this as well as Barbara did. Susan hadn't exactly left home; rather her home, the TARDIS, had left her.

'Perhaps I shouldn't indulge her so... Do you want Vicki to stay here?'

Barbara thought for a moment, and almost said 'Yes'. In the end she shook her head. 'I'm sure she'll be fine.'

'Tonight?' Fei-Hung said. He looked slightly pained, and Kei-Ying knew why. But Miss Law...'

'If the girl loves you, she'll understand.'

'It's not that,' the young man protested. 'It's right in the middle of *yuelaan jit!* Who wants to travel, especially after dark? It's bad luck -'

'And it will be worse luck for this Chesterton if you do not.'

'They arrived here overnight, travelling during *yuelaan jit*. Doesn't that prove my point?'

Kei-Ying let out a long sigh. 'Well, if you're afraid, I cannot force you to go...'

'I'm not afraid!'

'No?' Kei-Ying kept his face impassive. He knew his son wasn't afraid. At least, no more afraid than any sensible person would be.

Fei-Hung knew it too. 'This kind of manipulation is cheap and beneath you, Father. I am not so much of a hothead to be tricked with a simple challenge.'

Kei-Ying smiled. 'Then be afraid, or not, as you will. But go with the women, because that is what a good man and a good healer would do. If you are who you are, it doesn't matter whether you fear or not.'

Fei-Hung looked through to Barbara in the main hall and nodded. 'I still think it's a foolish thing to do.'

'I know. And it may well be. But it is also the right thing to do, and that's what is important.'

The sun was already sinking when Vicki followed Fei-Hung and Barbara out through the gates of Po Chi Lam, and into what she now knew to be the city of Guangzhou in the year 1865. She paused in the gateway and looked back at the surgery and school. The compound didn't look like it had looked in the few holographic films she had seen, yet it definitely had the same air as the sets in those movies.

She couldn't quite put her finger on what was different, or what was the same, but in her heart and her bones she felt there was something. For the first time in her life, Vicki had a feeling she could only describe as *roman vu*, a sense of being somewhere unreal. For a moment she didn't know whether she was in the nineteenth century or a fiction.

She ran to catch up with the others, and accompanied them on to the still-busy lamplit streets. Paper lanterns cast a dark light through the streets, and it was like viewing the world through a bruised eye.

'Don't they have streetlights yet?' she asked Barbara.

Barbara, like Ian, might be from an era that was nearly as primitive as the one they were in now, but she was almost as knowledgeable as the Doctor about still earlier times.

'There are oil lamps, of course. And some cities in the world will have gas lighting now.'

'You'd think they'd make things brighter than these lamps do.'

'I think they normally do. I've seen this kind of lamp before, in films and on television. I think it's to do with a particular festival, though I'm not sure which one.'

‘It is *yuelaan jit*,’ Fei-Hung said. ‘The Festival of Hungry Ghosts.’

Vicki had heard of this, but had no idea what it meant or when it happened. ‘It doesn’t sound terribly cheerful. Is it something like Hallowe’en?’

‘I think so,’ Barbara answered.

She seemed to want to say more, but fell silent. Vicki supposed she wanted to get into a long lecture to take her mind off Ian’s condition, and wished she could help.

‘I don’t know,’ Fei-Hung admitted. ‘What is Hallowe’en?’ Then, to Vicki’s surprise, he winked at her.

‘Hallowe’en is the old Celtic new year,’ Barbara began. ‘And also when the spirits of the dead were thought to return for one night, to join in the celebratory feast - if they could.’

‘Then it is probably similar, except that the spirits that emerge from the hells during *yuelaan jit* are more likely to be vengeful, and people try to show respect so that the spirits won’t haunt them. So they offer food and money.’

‘Is that what you were doing earlier?’ Vicki asked. ‘Burning money, I mean.’

‘Not real money. Hell money.’

‘Hell money?’

‘Your country and mine have different moneys, different currencies?’

‘Yes.’

‘So do the lands of the living and those of the dead.’

By now Fei-Hung had led them northwards through the city, passing parks and workshops, mansions, pagodas and slums. The difference in sights was impressive enough, but each area had sounds and smells of its own as if the space around the different types of neighbourhood had different properties.

Finally they skirted the edge of a park, making for what Fei-Hung called the Baiyun road. Across the park Vicki could see a tall pagoda, brightly lit by oil and gas lamps quite unlike the paper lanterns that had turned the air in the streets to blood. Cannon pointed out from the walls around its grounds, and she could see patrolling men in uniform.

‘What’s that?’ she asked.

Barbara and Fei-Hung stopped to look. ‘Those look like British uniforms,’ Barbara said slowly.

‘They are,’ Fei-Hung confirmed, tight-lipped. Their main garrison is on Xamian Island back in the river, but they also use this as a watchtower.’

‘It doesn’t look like a watchtower.’

‘It was a temple five hundred years ago. The British and French took it over a few years ago.’

‘During the Opium Wars?’ Barbara suggested.

‘Yes.’ Fei-Hung let out a snort, and turned back on to the path to the Baiyun road. ‘Come on. The sooner we reach this box of yours, the sooner your friend will be healed.’

Vicki could have sworn she heard an unspoken ‘gone’ instead of ‘healed’ in Fei-Hung’s voice. It was a moment of harshness that she hadn’t expected from him.

She remained for a moment longer. The park was at the top of a hill and the city was spread out below, all the way to the Pearl River which curved around to the right, parallel to their path. There were lights on the river as well as on the streets, drifting gently along in the current. Some were on boats like the large junk she could make out silhouetted against the sunset far to the west, but others were clearly floating on the water under the warm sky.

Then there was a strange flickering in her eyes. At first Vicki thought it was something actually inside one of her eyes - a floating cell, perhaps - but she decided otherwise. It was a faint ripple of light, centred on the junk in the west. It spread out, looking like sunlight gently kissing the tops of waves, and continued across the land. It crept across buildings and lightly touched the sky. Then it was gone, as if it had never been.

From the deck of the junk Cheng watched the ferryman bring his boat closer. As far as he was concerned, the man couldn’t move the thing fast enough. Moment by moment he was finding it harder to keep control of his bowels. His gut felt as if it were cartwheeling around the Beijing Opera stage. He

could hardly breathe, and was forcing his lungs to obey him, when Jiang joined him. Cheng thought his heart was going to burst and kill him on the spot.

‘It’s you... Don’t do that to me.’

Jiang looked thoughtful and relaxed. Cheng didn’t like this at all. Anything Jiang liked was usually only good for Jiang, and equally often bad for someone else.

‘Who is this abbot? Jiang asked.

Cheng stopped concentrating on his breathing and tried to resist the prickling that took hold of his skull under the scalp. ‘I don’t know.’

Jiang’s moustache turned up at the ends as he smiled. ‘You were terrified when you saw him. There must be a reason for that. You have met him before, haven’t you?’

The junk tried to judder round in Cheng’s vision, though it never actually moved. ‘I saw him once, yes. I don’t know who he is. I don’t know his name, or where he comes from, or what he wants.’

‘What do you know about him?’

Cheng’s gut tightened, though he couldn’t tell whether this was simply from remembered terror or from fear that Jiang would think he was lying and be offended. ‘I used to be a bandit.’

‘I know.’

‘The last robbery I did, a group of us attacked a caravan and looted it. There was myself, Pang, some others. We took shelter in a cave on a hillside, and there... there these three monks found us. They attacked, we fought. We got away.’

‘That doesn’t sound like something that would leave my friend Cheng in mortal terror.’

Cheng looked around for a way out and found none. There was an open door on the deck, but even if he went through it Jiang or someone else would ask him about the monks later. They’d ask again and again until he told them, and if he just ran away the whole issue would resurface at every opportunity. There was no escape.

He went into the junk’s galley to pilfer a bottle of rice wine, and brought it back to the deck. Gathering his thoughts, he

sat on a thick coil of rope, unstopped the bottle, and drank from it. The wine burnt pleasantly, chasing away the prickles from under his skin.

‘We didn’t win that fight,’ he admitted. ‘These three monks were good enough to join the Tigers, and more. They were the best that Shaolin training has to offer. So they beat us, and they bound us. Then something happened.’

‘Something?’

Cheng spread his hands and looked helplessly heavenwards, in search of the right words. ‘The cave wasn’t just a cave, it was man-made. A great hall, maybe, with jewels and quicksilver for stars in the ceiling. That night, it was *yuelaan jit* and the full moon. And the ghosts came.’

‘Ghosts?’ Jiang echoed, and a couple of men swabbing the deck behind him looked at each other with varying degrees of disbelief.

‘I saw lights in the ceiling, flying through the room like reflections on water. Then that abbot changed and his eyes glowed like lanterns.’

‘He froze like a corpse waiting for a spell to command it. That’s when we escaped. The ghosts took that abbot and maybe the other monks as well. And I came as far away from that cave as it was possible to get while still being in China.’

Jiang looked back at the doorway to below decks. And now he’s here.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Are you going to run away again?’

Cheng let out the kind of laugh that desperately wants to be a tearful wail. It felt like it was slashing at his stomach as it came out. ‘Where else could I go?’

There was a quiet call from below. The ferryman had arrived, and Cheng was only too happy to get off the junk. Jiang watched him go then went back below decks.

2

The evening was peaceful and calm, with birdsong fading. Vicki was quite enjoying the peace of it - the coolness of the

air, the quiet, the smell of plants and trees. She had almost managed to dismiss that strange flicker as a figment of her imagination.

She wasn't as emotionally attached to Ian as Barbara was, but she did care about both of them and could feel worry about them within her. She thought if her worry was making her vision falter like that, she wouldn't like to experience whatever Barbara must be going through. She supposed that must be a hundred times worse, or even a thousand. Finally, she decided that maybe she couldn't actually imagine how bad Barbara must be feeling.

Barbara was trying to behave normally, of course, but Vicki could tell the difference.

As the three of them walked under the waxing moon Fei-Hung dropped back into step with Vicki. The venom she had seen in his face when they were looking at the tower had gone, and he now looked at Barbara with reluctant concern.

'Miss...?'

'Everyone calls me Vicki.'

'Vicki... Is Chesterton Miss Wright's husband?'

'No. At least not formally.' She thought about it for a moment. 'Actually, I think maybe they are sort of married, but they just don't know it yet.'

Fei-Hung smiled faintly. 'I think I know what you mean. Sometimes it is just meant to be.'

'I suppose so.' She looked at him. He was barely older than herself, but there was a wisdom in his eyes that was almost as palpable as the wiry muscles that covered his body. 'You're nothing like I imagined...'

Fei-Hung looked puzzled for a moment, then quickly covered this with an expression Vicki could only think of as being on guard. 'You imagined me? You mean you've heard of me?'

'Oh yes. I've seen -' She caught herself at last. Cars and telephones weren't around yet, so she wasn't sure that moving pictures had been invented either. 'I've read about you.'

'The *gwailos* - sorry, no offence - the Europeans know my name? They've been writing reports?'

'Well, not exactly.'

Vicki wondered how the Doctor, Ian and Barbara coped with not being able to talk about things that were common knowledge to a time traveller, but a secret of the future to anyone they met. She doubted she would ever get used to it.

'You said something about there being a festival on now,' she said, more to make conversation and relieve the boredom of walking than actually to learn anything.

'Yes,' Fei-Hung nodded. He seemed unsure whether he should say any more, but finally continued. 'In the seventh moon of the year the gates of hell are opened so that the ghosts of the dead can come and look for food, and take revenge on people who wronged them. So we make offerings, and offer prayers, to dissuade the ghosts from harming us. At the full moon there will be feasts and operas to pacify the ghosts and bring good luck for the harvest season.'

'How did this festival start?' Barbara had joined them. 'I mean, there must be a reason why the ghosts would be let out,' she said.

'You don't believe this stuff, do you?' Vicki murmured, low enough, hopefully, for Fei-Hung not to hear her.

'No,' Barbara whispered back. 'But a culture's folklore is very much a part of its history, and understanding it helps you to understand the history.'

'It's a very old legend.' Fei-Hung answered Barbara, showing no sign of having heard their doubts. 'Long ago, before even the First Emperor, there was a greedy, selfish woman. She never thought of anyone but herself. When the poor begged for her help in the street, she would laugh in their faces and push them away.'

'She sounds perfectly awful.' Vicki said.

She also had a son, but he was virtuous and kind. Exactly the opposite of his mother in every way. He had a great deal of compassion for everyone, and one day he decided he could best help his fellow people by becoming a monk.

‘This rich woman was very angry with him for that, and thought he was a fool. Worse, she saw it as a betrayal as she thought he should be a professional craftsman, who would earn money and give it to her.’

‘Wasn’t she proud of her son?’

Fei-Hung shook his head. ‘She saw him only as a source of money. She didn’t love him for himself, as family, but only loved money and the things she could buy with it. When she realised he would not change his mind, and would not earn money for her, she wanted revenge.’

‘On the monks?’ Vicki asked. ‘Did she attack them?’

‘People offered food to them because they had little other means of supporting themselves...’

‘These monks would be vegetarian?’ Barbara supposed.

‘Exactly. And this woman secretly put meat into her offerings before giving them to the monks. In this way, she forced them - however unwittingly - to break their vow that they would be responsible for no harm coming to other beings.’

‘Didn’t they know that plants are living beings?’ Vicki asked.

‘Vicki!’

Barbara turned back to the baffled-looking Fei-Hung. ‘Sorry.’

‘It’s all right. Anyway, this woman was eventually punished by being sent to a hell where she sat on a bed of spikes, clinging to a basin of blood. Her son, of course, had compassion for her as well as for everyone else, and so he travelled into the hells to find her and try to relieve her suffering.’

‘When he found her he tried to feed her, but the food he offered would burn to ashes, and water or wine would turn to blood. So he did the only other thing he could think of - pray for her. The Buddha heard and was moved by the monk’s compassion, and decided to intervene. He decreed that once a year the gates of hell were to be opened for a month, so that the souls of the damned could return to earth for relief from their sufferings.’

‘And that’s now?’ Vicki looked sidelong at the shadows that were falling across the road from trees and bushes. Superstitions of this sort had disappeared centuries ago, as far as she was concerned, and yet the darkness seemed more alive than it had before Fei-Hung told the story. More alive and, by extension, more intriguing. Vicki couldn’t help but wonder what animals - or anything else - might be hidden in the deepening black that was closing in around the road.

She felt a thrill run up her back. It was easy to imagine all manner of strange creatures - ghosts and dragons, perhaps - lurking in the shadows, awaiting careless travellers. She knew such things were just from children’s stories, but it was kind of exciting to think about running into them.

She wanted to laugh, and to skip along the road the way she had skipped through the roof-top gardens of her childhood home, and through the corridors of the Ship she had been on before she met the Doctor, Ian and Barbara. Then she remembered the crash, and the deaths, and she didn’t want to laugh or skip any more. She decided it was silly to want to seek out monsters and danger - those were the things that sought you out and killed the ones you loved when you least expected it.

But she was enjoying the sense of freshness that being in a new place and time brought her, and wondered if China still had pandas in 1865. Seeing one of those would probably be more pleasant than seeing a ghost.

It began to rain and Vicki wished she was wearing clothes that were more waterproof. And the jacket of Barbara’s trouser suit wouldn’t react well to the wet if it was as woollen as it looked.

Fei-Hung put up an umbrella, and both women came closer to him to shelter under it, though it wasn’t really large enough to cover three people. ‘How fortunate I am,’ he said. ‘The ladies flock to me like birds to a tree.’

Lei-Fang was gone when Jiang returned to his lord’s cabin. Whether the militiaman had been taken away for treatment or tossed overboard, Jiang didn’t know. He didn’t even know

whether Lei-Fang still lived, or whether he had succumbed to the diabolical wounds that had been inflicted on him. He wasn't sure he wanted to know, either.

Jiang opened a shutter set into the wall and looked across the river to shore. Only the dying lanterns that the junk passed showed that the vessel was moving at all. Jiang could scarcely believe that such a smooth journey was possible.

Ahead, a jetty jutted out from a small promontory. It was half-hidden by bushes and reeds, and the buildings beyond it were equally well camouflaged by trees.

Jiang watched a column of men march along the riverside. The smell of burning wood, brick and flesh came before them, and the low clouds behind them glowed with reflected firelight. Glints of infernal light caressed the rain-spattered steel the men wore and carried, giving the column a glistening, serpentine appearance.

'Magnificent, are they not?' The abbot looked out, his features relaxed. Apart from the armed men, there had been nothing much to see during the short voyage. Just rice fields and the occasional village, but the abbot wore the look of an art connoisseur enjoying his collection.

The sights had bored Jiang. He saw no brothels, or arenas, or wine shops. The abbot looked as if he was being inspired, but Jiang couldn't imagine what could be inspiring him. He closed his eyes, inspired only to sleep.

'Men of learning,' the abbot said suddenly, and Jiang snapped into wakefulness as best he could, trying not to look irritated at his master's timing. 'Those are the most important of your targets.'

'But the foreigners -'

'- are a symptom of the ill health of my empire's body under the Manchu, not the cause of it. To cure the empire, we must deal with the cause.'

'Yes, my Lord,' Jiang acknowledged.

The abbot put a hand on his shoulder. 'Where your militia find astrologers, scholars of alchemy, powerful priests, they will find the empire's medicine. Those men you will bring before me. In chains if you have to.'

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘The others who are called - by themselves or others - men of learning are a different matter. The poets, teachers, weak priests... those are of no use to us. Those men you shall not leave alive.’

Jiang hesitated. Killing off Manchus or *gwailos* was one thing, but he had nothing against learned men. Except perhaps one. ‘Lord...’

‘If we are to unify our people against the invader and occupier, we must be sure that they think as we wish them to think. That they know the great history of their people that we know. Not what those who collaborate with invaders want to tell the people.’

Now Jiang saw what the abbot was getting at. He was shocked to realise that the enemies of his Lord were so close to home. ‘Teachers who show favour to foreigners?’

‘The worst of our enemies,’ the abbot said.

‘I know such a man. He treats me like a child, and gives succour to the white man.’

‘Then he should be dealt with,’ the abbot spat.

‘But I am but one man. Our forces can hardly march into Guangzhou.’

‘Then use your intelligence.’

The abbot’s hand was cold on Jiang’s shoulder, like a slab of salted pork. Jiang could feel the chill through his tunic and coat. Strangely, it felt exciting, and inspiring.

‘There is an old saying,’ he said. How better to destroy your enemies than to let them destroy themselves.’

The abbot, Jiang’s lord, nodded. ‘An old saying, even when I was young. I approve.’

‘I will begin at once, Lord.’

The abbot smiled again. ‘Begin in the morning. I must give my troops the same instructions I have given you.’

3

The rain was heavy but not cold, and as there was no wind it fell straight rather than cutting through them. The road was

made from hard-packed earth, but it was resisting the attempt to transform it, and only a thin wash of mud clutched feebly at their shoes. Vicki's were synthetic, and she knew Barbara's would be leather, so it was Fei-Hung she felt the most sympathy for - she suspected his slipper-like shoes would let the water through, if not soak it up.

'I hope the rain doesn't last long,' Barbara said. 'The road could turn into a quagmire.'

'It will probably pass quickly,' Fei-Hung replied.

Vicki sincerely hoped he was right about that. Over the last few months she had become used to nice, dry climates. Dido, the planet where she had first joined the TARDIS crew, was a desert, and there had been uniformly good weather in Turkey and Italy. Not that she minded rain, having spent so much time on a desert world, but she would have preferred more, lighter showers than a solid downpour.

Suddenly, she heard what sounded like a musical note. Then another and another. It was a voice, not an instrument, and it seemed to be singing. Neither Barbara nor Fei-Hung seemed to have noticed it, so Vicki suspected she might be imagining the sound. Then she heard it a little more clearly.

It was just too distant to make out the words, but the melody was haunting and faded in and out between the paths of falling raindrops. She turned her head this way and that, trying to judge the direction it was coming from. She finally decided that the sound came from ahead and to the left - the opposite side of the road to the path to the temple and the Ship.

The leaves of a flowering bush - Vicki had no idea what sort it was - rippled slightly, as if the notes were gently caressing the foliage on their way past it. She stopped and hissed to the others. They turned.

'What is it?' Barbara asked, concern in her tone.

'Do you hear that?'

'What?'

'It sounds like... singing.'

'Singing?' Barbara paused to listen. 'No, I don- Just a minute... I think I do.'

‘It’s your imagination,’ Fei-Hung said quickly. ‘The sound of rain hitting leaves, or a bird sheltering from it.’ He shuffled slightly, putting the umbrella in front of the women as if it were a colourful fly in front of a fish.

‘No,’ Barbara said, ‘she’s right. There is a voice singing. It’s coming from over there.’ She ducked out from under the umbrella and went to the roadside. ‘Look, there’s a path.’

Barbara ignored the rain that was soaking through her jacket - she felt only a tense urge to get back to Ian and see him stand again. But she knew that neither Vicki nor Fei-Hung would be feeling quite the same, and wondered whether it would really make a difference to Ian if they looked for shelter.

The Doctor had said he would be able to cure him, so it would be foolish to get Vicki or Fei-Hung ill for the sake of an hour or two while the rain passed over. If she had been alone she would have kept going, but she knew Ian would think of the others as well if he were here.

‘I think we should find some shelter,’ she said. ‘If that is someone singing, presumably they’re under cover.’

‘But... Oh, you’d never understand,’ Fei-Hung said. Barbara thought she heard a tremble in his voice. ‘This is *yuelaan jit*, the Festival of Hungry Ghosts. What real person would be out singing on a night like this?’

‘Gene Kelly, I suppose.’ Barbara sighed at Fei-Hung’s blank look, then tried not to laugh. ‘I don’t believe in ghosts and ghouls, and things that go bump in the night. If there is singing, then it must be a person.’

Fei-Hung opened his mouth to speak again, but Barbara had turned away and started up the path in the direction of the singing.

Vicki found the house first.

‘Barbara, Fei-Hung!’

They joined her, and she pointed to a low shape far back in the bushes. There was a clearing there, and a long roof.

‘Perhaps we can ask for shelter inside,’ Vicki said.

Barbara was in two minds, thinking back to another desperate night and seeking shelter in another lonely house. One of her minds reminded her that circumstances were very different in those days, and that here there was no reason for fear. The other needled her, reminding her gleefully that there was no reason to be confident or comfortable either.

To spite it, she started towards the house. Behind her she heard Fei-Hung say to Vicki, 'Can't you reason with her?'

'I happen to agree with her. You're not afraid of spooks and spectres, are you? They're just stories to frighten children.'

'There could be bandits.'

'Then you can fight them off.'

Barbara reached the clearing and the house. The building was all of one storey, with a wooden table and bench in front of it. Three steps led up to the door, and all the windows were covered with shutters made from wood carved into a pattern so delicate it was almost filigree. The dark tiles on the roof glistened with wetness, and the walls exuded a clammy feeling. A faint ripple of light passed across it, perhaps as the leaves on the surrounding trees fluttered in the moonlight.

Barbara tried to look in through the windows, but the shutters blocked most of the view and the house was filled with darkness. She tried knocking on the door, but there was no answer. She knocked again, and this time the door juddered open a couple of inches.

She stepped back, startled, ready to apologise when the occupants demanded to know why she was bursting into their home. The only thing that emerged from the quiet darkness within was a faint smell of flowers and incense, just tangible enough to be pleasant.

Nothing else happened, other than the rain continuing to patter on the leaves, and Barbara suddenly realised that the singing had stopped. Perhaps whoever it was didn't want visitors, and was playing dumb in the hope that the trio would pass on by.

'Hello?' she called.

No answer.

She heard Fei-Hung beside her, and turned to see him lift a lamp from a hook on the eaves. It was old and grimy but, after shaking it and peering inside, he said, 'There's still a little oil in here.' He pulled out some flint and steel and lit the lamp.

In the soft lamplight Barbara could see through the gap in the doorway into the house. The floor was covered in dust that was disturbed only by old footprints made by small paws and claws. There was no furniture in the part she could see.

'It looks deserted,' Vicki said. She was holding Fei-Hung's umbrella now that he had the lamp.

Barbara decided that if anyone was in the house they would either have come to investigate by now or they were unconscious and needed help. More likely, they just didn't exist. She pushed the door open and it juddered over the uneven floor. The rest of the room was as bare as the part she had already seen. There was no furniture, but nor were there spots of wetness, which meant they could shelter from the rain.

The three of them went inside and Barbara almost closed the door, but thought better of it. She didn't want it to jam and trap them inside.

'Well, this is cosy.'

'I suppose,' Vicki said doubtfully. 'Some chairs would be nice.'

'Be grateful, Vicki. The roof is solid, so we won't get any wetter. The grass is always greener, isn't it?'

'What?' Vicki sank on to her haunches in a corner.

'People always seem to want more, rather than appreciating what they've got.'

Fei-Hung cast the lamplight around the room. He still looked a little nervous, but not as nervous as before. His face set into a look of more practical concern. 'I'd better check we're alone.'

'Of course we're alone.' Vicki said.

'I meant animals. Snakes, especially, like to shelter in places like this.'

Vicki immediately jumped to her feet, looking down as if she expected to see a cobra flaring its hood at her from the patch of dust she had disturbed. Barbara tried not to smile too obviously, and Vicki sat back down.

There were only two doors. Fei-Hung shone the lamplight through first one, then the other. 'No snakes,' he said, sounding surprised.

'Is there any furniture?' Vicki asked. Chairs, or stools?'

No.' He put the lamp on the floor near Vicki. 'You were right,' he said to Barbara. 'This is a good place to wait out the rain.'

Barbara wished she could feel as patient about reaching the Ship and getting the medical kit back to the Doctor as she had been when she was out in the rain. 'Are we for from the TAR- from the old temple?'

The young man frowned in concentration. 'Perhaps another half-mile, but the path leading to it will be on the other side of the road.'

'That shouldn't take us long, once the rain has stopped.'

Barbara turned and went to lean against the door, looking out at the mini-deluge. Though she didn't like getting wet, she had always loved watching rain. It was such a fresh and natural thing, washing away the dirt and dust of the day, bringing life to trees and flowers, and even the potatoes in the family allotment. Sometimes she would stand at her bedroom window, imagining herself to be looking out at a storm from the wheelhouse of one of the steamers her father helped to build.

She had once wondered, setting an imaginary course to search for sunken treasure from the Armada, whether she could grow up to become a sea captain, but her father told her that many sailors were superstitious and thought women brought bad luck. Then, as she got older, she was more interested in the hows and whys of things like the Armada than she was in treasure.

Now, in a deserted house in China, she found herself standing on an imaginary deck, perhaps of a seagoing junk plying between China, India and far Araby. She tried to recall

the tune of a sea shanty and hum it, but she couldn't quite get it right. The wrong notes kept insinuating themselves into her ears, so that the humming sounded like the melody of the song they'd heard earlier.

She realised that someone was actually humming the tune, and turned to berate Fei-Hung or Vicki for doing so.

Her heart sprang for her throat with deadly intent, and nearly knocked her over, as she saw a woman in a silk tunic and long silk dress standing at the window, humming to herself. Her feet were hidden under the dress, but there were no wet footprints near her. Barbara's strangled cry alerted Fei-Hung, who leapt into a fighting stance, and Vicki, who cupped a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream.

The woman turned. She was pale and delicate, her skin the tone of a paper-thin china cup, nearly transparent in its fineness.

'I like to watch the rain too,' she said. Her voice was soft and distant, but carried quite clearly.

'You startled us,' Barbara said. 'We didn't hear you come in.' How could she have, without brushing past her? Or, Barbara thought with a shiver, passing *through* her.

'I didn't.'

Barbara immediately felt guilty as well as foolish. 'I'm sorry - the door fell open and we called out, but there was no answer. We only wanted to shelter from the rain.'

'That's all right.' The woman smiled pleasantly. 'This isn't really my home any more, anyway. It used to be.'

Fei-Hung stepped up beside Barbara and said in a low voice, 'I looked in both the other rooms. There was no-one there, and no place for her to have been hidden.'

Barbara felt her insides tense again, just a little. 'A back door...?'

'None.'

Barbara swallowed, hard. 'We heard singing earlier, the same tune you were just humming. Was that you?'

'Yes. I sing to my beloved. He's dead now.'

'I'm sorry.'

‘That’s all right. He wouldn’t have gone off to the army if I’d asked him to stay with me.’

Barbara felt an immediate sympathy. The poor girl was probably still in mourning for a man killed. If the song was a lament that would explain its melody.

‘It can’t be your fault,’ she said.

‘It was my fault for not telling him I love him, and for not luring him to marriage. He’d still be alive then, and I’d still be a lover.’ The woman looked around. ‘The house would not be so cold and empty.’

Barbara, chilled and touched, couldn’t help looking round as well, to better empathise with this story. She regretted it immediately, because the table, chairs, ornaments and platters of food would have been so enticing if they had been there even a moment ago.

Now the smell of a large, spicy repast filled a room bright with the light of many candles, and Vicki was knocking over a chair as she ran for the door. Fei-Hung was chanting something, and keeping his guard up, as he physically shoved Barbara outside.

Fei-Hung cursed himself, and the *gwailo* women. He had known the house would be haunted; known it in his heart and his bones, and he should never have let them shelter there.

‘Run!’ he told them, pushing Barbara ahead. Neither she nor Vicki needed to be told twice, and Fei-Hung hoped the ghosts would not pursue them.

They burst out on to the Baiyun road and headed for the old temple, pursued only by the soulful notes of the lament that had drawn them to the house in the first place.

The rain had stopped, thankfully, and it didn’t take long to reach the temple. Fei-Hung didn’t feel entirely confident that it would be any more spiritually unpopulated than the house, but he had nowhere else to go. The *gwailos* had said this box of theirs was a place of safety, so even if the temple was haunted, at least there was some sanctuary to be had.

He recognised the fallen stones and overgrown pathway from the previous night, and hesitated. Then he continued towards the box that his father had said must belong to the *gwailos* on Xamian Island, and the Doctor had said belonged to him. Sure enough, Barbara was heading straight for it, a key glittering in her hand.

Barbara turned this way and that, dizzy from fear and the pungency of rotting undergrowth. Then she saw the windows of the TARDIS doors gazing affably at her from the archway, and felt the weight lift from her shoulders.

She tried the key in the lock. At first she thought it was going to stick and reject her, but then the door opened. She entered, embraced by the Ship.

Inside, she could finally relax. The TARDIS was too clinical and technological to feel like a home, or even a refuge, but it was welcoming and protective all the same. It would defend those who travelled with it, and keep them safe while they were in its care.

Barbara felt the urge to pat the nearest panel of the central console, and did so a little self-consciously. Maybe it was her imagination, but the ever-present buzz of the Ship's mechanisms seemed to change for a moment, the way a cat's purr does when you stroke it. If so, she couldn't help but wonder whether the maybe-imaginary change in tone was for the same reason.

Having caught her breath, she went through into the antechamber where the food machine loomed. It took her a moment to realise that the one indented roundel that didn't glow was the cupboard door she was looking for. The first-aid kit and vaguely paintbrush-like object the Doctor had described were indeed there, along with various other devices and knick-knacks.

Vicki was torn between following Barbara into the blessed sanctity of the TARDIS, and staying to reassure the increasingly jittery Fei-Hung. She paused on the threshold of

the Ship and turned back to him. Barbara would be out in a moment anyway.

She thought back to what had happened in the house. The woman appearing from nowhere was bad enough, but the whole place had suddenly changed. It was like being in a museum when the holographic exhibits were switched on, but no such thing had been invented yet.

It must have been a ghost after all.

4

Xamian Island was vaguely cigar-shaped, and nestled in a bay against the southwest corner of the city where the great Pearl River split in two. The main river continued southwards, but another one turned eastwards for a while.

The sun rose, casting light and heat across the roof tops, and across the parks and courtyards, and across the parade ground at Xamian, and finally across the faces and skin of the people who were up and about at that hour.

Sergeant Major Anderson was only 5 foot 4 inches, but nobody could have mistaken him for anything less than hard as nails. Perhaps it was the Glasgow accent, or the flattened nose cultivated by years as a bare-knuckle bantam. Maybe it was just because no-one in the regiment had ever seen him smile.

Captain Richard Logan knew better than that. Anderson was a tough nut, but in Logan's eyes this was simply because he was insane. Not in the devil-may-care, courageous way that the major was insane, but in a sour and sadistic way that thrived on taking out his troubles on whichever poor bugger caught his glance the wrong way.

Logan envied the major his extra lie-in in bed. He would much rather get up at a more leisurely pace than be out here with the Scottish devil, watching the men form up at reveille.

The company stood in lines and Logan walked along them, adjusting a button here, ordering a polish there. The sergeant major, who had already been up for ages and seemed to have

an inhuman lack of need for sleep, marched in step with him, glowering at the men.

‘Everything seems in order, Sarn’t Major. Have them fall out for breakfast.’

‘Aye, sir.’ As Logan headed for his own office, where his batman would already be waiting with his breakfast, he heard Anderson bellow at the men to fall out and report to the mess.

Anderson stayed where he was as the men fell out, silently counting the seconds in his head, seeing how long he could glare at nothing in particular without blinking. There were plenty of men around to watch him from the corners of their fluttering eyes, fearing his wrath, wondering at his motives. Thinking he was insane, which he knew Logan did. He liked that, because it kept them on their toes.

After two and a half minutes his eyelids rebelled, forcing a blink on to his features. He turned on his heel and marched towards his billet, satisfied that the men’s fear and wonder had been properly reinforced.

The major felt that another, equally hot and burning, sun was rising from the nape of his neck to the centre of his skull. Far from waking him, it baked the inside of his head and battered the back of his eyeballs with waves of heat. He reached up to touch the side of his head, behind his ear. The whole area was hot to the touch under his fingertips, and the light pressure of his fingers sent a bolt of agony through his brain that almost had him dropping to his knees with a scream.

A batman had delivered a tray of devilled eggs, ham, toast and marmalade to his quarters. The major didn’t have any appetite, but forced down about half of each thing as he knew that not eating anything would lead him to feel a great deal sicker later on in the day.

Then he put on his uniform, and walked around the parade ground to his office. It was small and cluttered, as company staff offices usually were in his experience, but a little more

homely than most, thanks to a few souvenirs on the walls. A picture of the major with his fellow officers at a billet hung next to the portrait of Queen Victoria. He wondered idly how he knew who she was. A curved, broad-bladed sword hung on another wall and, of course, the major's helmet - currently resting on a spare chair - had a *pagri* wrapped round it and no plume.

He sat down in his chair and turned to look up at the photographic print next to the portrait. It had a caption identifying the men as members of a Hussar company at Jaipur, in 1860. Everyone wore full dress uniform and, after a moment, the major recognised a face on the far left of the picture as the same one he had seen in the mirror that morning. The face in the picture had a full beard rather than just its present handlebar moustache, but he recognised it all the same.

'So, I've been to India...' He looked at the sword on the other wall. It looked Indian to him, though he wasn't sure what gave him this idea. He just felt it.

Before he could explore his office further, there was a knock at the door.

'Enter,' he said.

Logan went into the major's office with all its souvenirs of India. The major looked drawn and haggard, which Logan took to be the result of a painful and sleepless night. Though he didn't say a word, the major gave him a mirthless smile and a nod.

'That bad, am I?'

'I'm afraid so, sir.'

'I've had worse. I think.'

'It was a pretty bad fall, sir. Are you sure you don't want the MO to look at it?'

'I'm sure.' The major turned his head, pointing to an area behind and above his ear. 'It's just a bump, you see?'

Logan looked at the bump. Even through the hair he could see that the scalp was swollen and darkening like smoke from a funeral pyre. When the major turned back, Logan

could see the tension in his jaw and the spectre of pain that haunted his eyes. At that moment, if he had had the power to take the injury himself and in the process liberate the major from it, he would have. Better that than to see the look in the major's eyes.

'I see, sir,' he said at last.

Much as he would rather the major saw a doctor, Logan decided he ought to honour the man's desire to carry on as normal despite the bump. 'There are more reports from Peking,' he said, 'and from the Kwantung militia commandant.'

The major was relieved that Logan was getting straight to business. He didn't think he was up to thinking too hard about things today, but making the effort was better than letting some quack take the company away from him, even for a few days.

'More bandit attacks?'

'I don't think we can call it that for much longer, sir. The brigadier general in Peking is of the opinion that these attacks on towns have already reached the level of outright armed insurrection against the emperor. He thinks what we're seeing are the first engagements in a civil war.'

The major shook his head, and immediately regretted it as the pain washed like a tide, breaking against first one side and then the other. He waited a moment for the waves to subside, then said, 'And who does his nibs blame for this?'

'The Black Flag, of course,' Logan answered in a surprised tone. 'Much Black Flag activity centres on this province, and he suggests we co-operate with the Kwantung militia to stamp it out.'

'I see,' the major said, rather than admit that he had no idea who the Black Flag were. Clearly Logan thought he did, which suggested he was more injured than he thought after that fall.

The major tried to remember where he had been going when he had the fall, and felt the blood drain from his face when he realised he had no idea. He could remember his

agonising impact with the ground, and he knew who he was, but everything before the fall was a blank.

‘Are you all right, sir?’ Logan looked slightly panicked. ‘I’ll fetch a doctor’

‘No!’ The major forced himself to appear calm, so as not to upset Logan any further. ‘No, that’s all right. What do you think of the brigadier general’s theory?’

‘I think nobody has pointed out to him that the Kwantung militia are largely Black Flag themselves,’ Logan said. ‘The Black Flag are a nuisance, but they’re more concerned with getting their own people into government positions, and getting the Manchus out. I can’t really see them being responsible for wholesale slaughter of Chinese citizens. It’s not really their kind of thing, sir.’

‘Then that would suggest someone else is responsible, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, sir.’

The major thought for a moment. The present and future were more important than his own forgotten past. ‘We’ll go along with the idea of co-operating with the Kwantung militia, but I don’t think we need to make it an operation against the Black Flag specifically. Whoever is doing this must be making them pretty angry too, I should think. With any luck they’ll want to put a stop to it as much as we do.’

Logan smiled brightly and warmly. ‘I think so, too. I’ll get on with it right away.’

‘Good. Carry on.’

The major returned Logan’s parting salute, and was then alone in his office. Alone except for an identity that was a stranger to him, and a past that was as hidden from his memory as the future.

A quick root through the desk drawers told him what he needed to know about his current duties, and who the major figures and factions in Kwantung were. The logbooks and reports in question were all in his own handwriting. The major decided he agreed with Logan’s assessment of the Black Flag, and that it was unlikely they’d be behind these attacks on towns.

Finally, in the bottom right-hand drawer, he found a folded double picture frame. When he opened it he found that one oval contained a picture of himself, rather younger and cleanshaven. The other picture was of the face of a lady of about the same age. She was dark-haired and rather striking. Her image stirred a feeling of comfort and peaceful warmth that, just for an instant, smoothed out the turbulent waves in the maelstrom that was his wounded head.

It was both reassuring and strangely disappointing that his life so far could be summed up by a few items in an office. A girl, his service record, and images and souvenirs of places to which he had been posted. It wasn't much to show for the distances he'd travelled, or the hundreds of people he must have met, or the thousands - millions, probably - of words spoken.

It was as if he had simply chosen one day to reinvent himself as a character for a novel or the stage, except that he had no choice in the matter. The chaplain would be horrified at the idea, but the major decided that his Maker had a twisted sense of humour.

Logan was about to take a patrol across to the shore when he saw a commotion at the gate of the garrison. Two guards were remonstrating with a local and he walked over to see what was going on.

The visitor was a Chinaman with shaggy hair and an equally disreputable moustache. Despite this, his clothes were the finest available from Kwantung's silk markets and he carried himself like an athlete. Logan recognised his bearing at once, as that of a master from one of the city's Chinese boxing schools. He also looked vaguely familiar, and Logan was sure he had seen the man before as a member of the part-time Kwantung militia.

'It's Captain Jiang, isn't it?' he asked.

Jiang nodded. 'Yes, sir.'

He seemed excited about something, in a smarmy sort of way that made Logan uneasy.

‘It’s in that capacity that I have come.’ His English was slow and stilted, and heavily accented. ‘I have information of a crime against an Englishman.’

Logan was immediately interested and alert. ‘Well, out with it, man!’

‘As you know, I am deputy at the Po Chi Lam surgery and *gungfu* school. My *sifu*, Wong Kei-Ying, is holding English travellers hostage. One of them, a young man, has been tortured, and there may be women in the group.’

‘Tortured?’ Logan exploded. He knew immediately that he’d need to mount a punitive raid, and had no doubt the major would agree.

‘Beaten severely by several experts,’ Jiang specified.

‘And this man, he’s still there?’

‘Yes.’ Jiang frowned. ‘At least, I think so. The travellers may have been killed already.’

‘Then there’s no time to lose. Sergeant Major!’

Anderson appeared in a doorway immediately.

‘I want ten men. Captain Jiang of the militia here will tell you where you’ll be going with them. I’ll fetch the major.’

‘Aye sir,’ Anderson rapped and was gone, Jiang with him.

Logan dashed across the parade ground into the main company building, and hurried along to the major’s office. He knocked and was called in immediately.

‘You look as though you’ve seen a ghost,’ the major said, looking up from the reports he was reading.

‘If we’re not quick we might see a new one, sir. An English one, at that.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’ve just been given a pretty queer story by one of our liaisons in the militia. He says that a group of English travellers is being held hostage at Po Chi Lam. At least one has already been beaten within an inch of his life.’

The major looked startled. ‘I’ll come at once.’

Outside the office window the giant, Pang, was unloading crates from a wagon. Glass clinked tellingly within them. Pang’s understanding of English was limited, to say the least,

but the words Po Chi Lam' tripped all manner of alarm bells in his head.

Without finishing the unloading he hopped back on the wagon, and made for the bridge back to the shore.

Kei-Ying was taking morning tea in his hall, and greeted the Doctor with a polite 'Good morning' when he walked in.

'What? Yes, I suppose it's as best as can be expected,' the Doctor said.

Kei-Ying smiled to himself. Some people were not morning people, and he found no shame in that.

'My son and your friends will be back soon.'

'I sincerely hope so. I must confess to a certain impatience to see Chesterfield, er, that is, young Chesterton there, back on his feet.'

'He is important to you?'

'Everyone is important to me, young man.'

Kei-Ying was a little bemused at being called 'young man' for the first time in over a decade.

'Who did those ruffians think he is?' the Doctor continued. 'Neither Chesterton nor myself have been in China for several cen- for a very long time.'

'There's a Chesterton with the British garrison here. He looks very much like your friend, and I suppose the people who attacked him must have thought they were one and the same. Then when they heard that your friend's name is Chesterton...'

'I see.'

'I myself thought they were the same man, but if you and he have only just arrived, then it cannot be so. The man they wanted to hurt has been here for two years.'

'The same man,' the Doctor said thoughtfully. He looked troubled. 'Is it possible?'

Kei-Ying thought better than to ask what he was talking about.

The Doctor looked into the distance. 'Perhaps if we knew when he had first arrived, and where he was before,' he said. He pursed his lips and looked out through the gates at a

figure running through the street. 'It's that one-eyed fellow from the inn where we were set upon.'

'Cheng?'

Kei-Ying turned, thinking the Doctor must have exceptional eyesight by anyone's standards, let alone someone of his generous years. It was indeed Cheng, running, dodging basket-laden merchants and almost slipping on fallen fruit.

'Wong-sifu,' he gasped, out of breath. 'Pang just told me. The English are coming for you.'

'What?'

Kei-Ying wondered why on earth they would be looking for him. He and his son helped to train the Guangzhou militia, who collaborated with the foreign soldiers.

'They think you've kidnapped, or killed, someone.'

'That's ridiculous.' Kei-Ying shivered.

'I know, but they're coming.'

Kei-Ying turned to the Doctor. 'If they see you and your injured friend here, it -'

'I understand. It might make them think we are your prisoners, or that your people mistreated Ian. But, on the other hand, perhaps I can help you by putting in a good word.'

'They'd only arrest you too,' Cheng prophesied. 'Say you're a traitor or something.'

'There is that, I suppose,' the Doctor admitted.

Kei-Ying put a hand on his shoulder. 'I think the best thing would be for you to keep watch over Ian until my son and the women return. His recovery is the most important thing at the moment.'

The Doctor's gaze was drawn back indoors. 'You're right, of course.'

'Stay quiet. Just in case.'

'As you say.'

The Doctor disappeared into the sprawling surgery and Kei-Ying seated himself comfortably on a stool on the veranda. Presently, there was a knocking on the gates at the far side of the courtyard. One of Kei-Ying's students rushed across to see who it was.

'That will be the British army,' Kei-Ying called out to him. Let them in, then tell Cousin Yee to bring tea and *yum cha*.'

The student paused only to bow before opening the gates. The visitors were indeed soldiers. The enlisted men looked nervous, but their rifles were slung over their shoulders and not in their hands. In the lead were two officers. The younger one had a plume on his helmet and a Vandyke beard. The older man had some sort of cloth wound round his helmet in lieu of a plume, and a handlebar moustache.

'Master Wong?' the bearded one asked. Kei-Ying nodded.

'I'm Captain Logan. We have been given information -'

'Suggestions and supposition, perhaps, but not information.'

'We've been told that you are holding some English prisoners.'

'Prisoners?' It was all Kei-Ying could do not to laugh. 'That's insane.'

'We have a reliable witness. He says that there's a beaten man, and possibly female hostages as well.'

'There are no Englishwomen here.'

'And Englishmen?'

'There are six standing in front of me, so I can hardly deny that.'

'Perhaps if we could look around inside?'

Kei-Ying shook his head with a smile. 'I'm sorry,' he said, and meant it. 'But I have patients who must not be disturbed.'

'Master Wong, you strike me as an honourable man, yet you're shooting yourself in the foot here. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to get me to take you back for questioning.' The captain sighed. 'All right, we do need to ask you a few questions, if only to determine how honest our informant is. I have no choice but to place you under arrest for the moment.'

Kei-Ying had expected no different from such a professional man. He admired professionalism. 'I can only tell you the truth, Captain, and you won't believe it when I do. So you will be arresting me whatever happens.'

'We don't know that. You're well respected by the Kwantung militia, and I sure as hell don't want to arrest you. So why not try me?'

Kei-Ying nodded. Fate couldn't be cheated. 'Some men attacked an Englishman at the Hidden Panda. Cheng brought him here for treatment.'

'Where is he now?'

Kei-Ying took a deep breath. 'Standing next to you.'

Inside, in the shadowed coolness of the hall, the Doctor had been listening. He looked through the interior door to where Ian lay unconscious, then peered through the latticework shutters at the soldiers.

The major turned and the Doctor could finally see his face. His hair had a few streaks of grey in it, and he had a handlebar moustache the shade of faded ink, but it was a face the Doctor had become accustomed to over the last couple of years.

The Doctor's eyes widened slightly, and he whispered, 'Chesterton.'

5

Major Chesterton had been sweating under the sun, as much from the heat inside his skull as from the heat outside. He had been perfectly content to let Logan do the talking so far as he didn't trust himself to avoid slurring his words, forgetting them altogether or betraying his mental fogginess.

And then Wong Kei-Ying had pointed to him. Chesterton couldn't quite deny what he had said, though Logan and Anderson clearly expected some such outright dismissal.

'I don't think I've ever been treated by you, Master Wong. I'm sure I would have remembered.'

Kei-Ying looked him up and down, and his lip curled as if he was suppressing a pain. 'I don't know how or why you don't remember, but I treated you last night.'

Chesterton hesitated. Wong looked and sounded sincere, and if he'd made this statement about someone else he would

certainly have believed him. But since Chesterton knew he had been with Logan and Anderson and the rest of the garrison last night, he knew Wong was lying. He suddenly felt a tinge of admiration for the man's barefaced cheek.

'You have to come with us, I'm afraid,' he said.

'I told you so,' Kei-Ying said. He looked around at the students, who were starting to gather around the courtyard. 'Might I give instructions to my staff to look after the surgery and school while I'm with you?'

Chesterton agreed immediately.

Kei-Ying went into the hall and spotted the Doctor hovering in the doorway to Ian's room, neither quite in one place nor the other.

'Doctor,' he began, uncertain how to proceed. 'That man outside... it's him.' He pointed to Ian.

'Yes, I saw. This is a most unfortunate turn of events, my friend. Unfortunate and dangerous.'

Kei-Ying couldn't disagree. 'I will have to go. Somehow I must make that Chesterton...,' he gestured to the major, '... understand that I am not his enemy.'

'I will come and speak to him later,' the Doctor promised.

In the meantime, I have a favour to ask.'

'Anything, Master Wong. My friends and I are... well, we are in your debt.'

'Someone must take charge of Po Chi Lam while I am at Xamian. I would like you to do so.'

'Me, sir?' the Doctor protested. 'But I am -'

'You are a man of medicine, and of reason. Don't worry about the *gungfu* school, my son will handle that side of things. But Po Chi Lam must stay open for people to visit it for help when they are ill.'

The Doctor drew himself up, clutching his lapels. 'I shall do my best to honour your request, Master Wong.'

'Thank you.'

Barbara wanted to run all the way back to Po Chi Lam from the old temple, but her tired legs and feet would never have

been up to the task. She suspected that Fei-Hung might have managed it - he seemed the athletic type - but in the end their pace was much the same as when they had walked to the temple.

As a result, they arrived at Po Chi Lam just in time to see a British captain with a Vandyke beard escorting Kei-Ying to a small carriage outside the gates. Another carriage filled with uniformed men was already rattling unsteadily away. Barbara didn't like the look of this at all.

'What the hell?' Fei-Hung darted past her and ran down the street towards the gates. One of the soldiers levelled his gun at him as he approached, forcing the young man to raise his hands.

'It's all right,' Kei-Ying shouted, then repeated the words more calmly. 'I won't be gone long.'

Fei-Hung couldn't take his eyes off the gun, wondering just how fast a bullet would travel. 'Is this the thanks you get for-'

'Never mind,' Kei-Ying snapped. 'There are issues here that I can't explain. But the Doctor might be able to.'

'The Doctor?'

'I've put him in charge of the surgery. You know the training schedule well enough to handle it?'

'Of course, but -'

'No buts, son. Talk to the Doctor. He'll explain.'

'Those *gwailos* are a curse on us, Father.' Fei-Hung could feel his fists flexing of their own volition.

'Trust me,' Kei-Ying said simply, and turned to step proudly into the carriage.

The men's words had reached Barbara and Vicki faintly, but clearly. The women exchanged glances, each wishing to see whether the other comprehended the situation.

'What's happening?' Vicki asked.

'They said the Doctor would know, and he usually does.'

'But Master Wong helped us.'

As Vicki watched Kei-Ying walk out under armed escort without showing any signs of being ruffled she could, for a

moment, almost see a taller man in his place, proudly wearing the uniform of the Merchant Space Marine.

Lieutenant Commander Pallister would have responded exactly as Kei-Ying had. For the briefest of moments he was there, alive and on duty. Then he was gone, and Kei-Ying was boarding the carriage, and a tear was on Vicki's cheek.

The abbot was walking down the gangplank even before it thumped on to the ground. He was glad to be on dry land again, and gladder still to be met by such a glorious sight.

Flame cleansed the buildings, while the ragged townspeople were being organised by his troops and formed into orderly parties, ready for work.

Zhao and Gao were already ashore, helmetless but in full armour, poring over a scroll they had unrolled between them.

'Brothers,' the abbot called out, 'well done.'

Gao looked round and snorted. 'The men of this age are weak, but they still have some fire in their bellies.'

'Especially when motivated properly,' Zhao added with a sly grin.

'And the temple?' the abbot asked.

Zhao became more serious. 'The local priests we interrogated say it burnt down 150 years ago. A new Buddhist temple has been built on the site.'

'Raze it.' The abbot took the scroll and spread it out on the ground. 'How many of these sites do we hold?'

'Directly or indirectly, more than half,' Gao replied. 'Most of the sites are not well guarded, or indeed guarded at all.'

'I would still be happier,' Zhao rumbled, 'if we struck outward in concentric circles from the origin point. That way we could consolidate a perimeter -'

'Which would continually expand until our forces were stretched too thinly all around it,' the abbot snapped, disappointed at the answer to his query. He reached out to touch Zhao's shoulder. 'I have my reasons, my general. Have I led you false so far?'

'No, my Lord.'

'Nor will I.'

Zhao lowered his head apologetically. 'I would never doubt my Lord. I merely thought to see you conquer that which you most desire, Lord.'

'I know.'

'Of the sites... What of T'ai Shan?'

The abbot grimaced, remembering another time and another life. 'Ah, the sacred mountain...' His eyes narrowed vengefully. 'When the time comes, the gods there will not reject me this time.' He smiled and looked down, turning his hands over in front of his eyes.

Quietly, so that only Zhao and Gao could hear, he added, 'I've outlived them.'

6

The wooden floor and walls of the central hall at Po Chi Lam felt darker to Fei-Hung. Dark, cold and dead. It was like being trapped in the heart of a dead tree with no way out to the soft floor of the forest.

He was breathing too fast, and he knew it.

The Doctor was checking through the little case that Barbara had fetched from the TARDIS. Vicki had tried to speak to Fei-Hung but he had brushed the little *gwailo* aside. The way he was feeling was all the fault of her and her friends. He clenched his fists.

'We can't leave my father in the hands of those barbarian *gwailos*... no offence, by the way. He wouldn't let any of his friends rot like that -'

'Indeed, and nor shall we,' the Doctor said sharply. 'But we can't just go running around like headless chickens, now can we, hmm? What good would it do Master Wong if we all went and got ourselves jailed as well? Or worse?'

Fei-Hung glared at him, willing the old man to keel over. He was too sensible to pretend he didn't know the Doctor was right, and young enough to be frustrated by this. 'Then we should make sure we don't get caught.'

The Doctor took up a lecturing pose. ‘And how does anyone give such guarantees? No, anything we do should be done with thought and civility.’

‘And what are you planning to do?’

‘First, I shall complete the job of healing my friend that your father started. Then I shall go and speak to the major who was here, and try to settle the problem with rationality and diplomacy, and not some kind of bash-and-dash nonsense that you young people seem to think is so important.’

Ian was immersed in pain, the skin boiling from his flesh and the flesh from his bones, with nothing to cool the water and restore him.

There was a strange smell of alien herbs in the air, and the sound of singsong voices. He didn’t wonder where he was - he remembered they had arrived in nineteenth-century China - but in a way this was a disadvantage. At least if he couldn’t remember what had happened, he wouldn’t constantly be reliving it in his head. Waking or sleeping, the beating had been an expert one by anybody’s standards, and he had all the pleasures of remembering every blow in intimate detail.

Then he opened his eyes and knew that the world was for the most part still a good and just place, because Barbara Wright’s face was the first thing he saw.

After an hour or so, Ian was able to sit up and take some soup and tea while the Doctor and Barbara filled him in on what had happened while he was unconscious. Barbara’s hand gripped his own with a crushing force throughout their story, but it was a discomfort worth having.

‘What I don’t understand,’ Ian said at the end, ‘is what those men had against me. I mean, if they just hated foreigners or white men... Well, it’s senseless but it happens. Along with being red on the inside, and thinking that people who share the same views are right, a dislike for people who are different is one of the few things that makes all creeds

and colours the same. But those men knew my name and singled me out.'

The Doctor was packing away his instruments into the medical kit from the TARDIS. 'They knew your name and, yes, they seemed to hold some kind of grudge against you, though I've yet to make the inquiries that might give us a clue as to why.'

'But it's impossible!'

'No, it isn't. Not in the TARDIS. Disturbing, yes... Troubling, yes... But not impossible. It seems, young man, that you are going to make quite an impression on some future visit.'

Ian's head was starting to get fuzzy. He could hear and see well enough, but surely the words were getting scrambled on the way to his brain. Was the Doctor talking about a journey in the TARDIS? Ian remembered the TARDIS, but wasn't sure he recalled every trip he'd made in it. 'Future visit? What do you mean?'

'You'll agree that those people clearly knew who you are, hmm?'

Ian winced as the bruises on his side tried to stretch while he put his shirt back on. 'Demonstrably.'

'Quite so, quite so... But you've never been to nineteenth-century Guangdong before, have you?'

'Well, you'd know if we'd landed here before.'

'Of course. So obviously you must return here on a future journey, but to a point in time some little time before today. Those people have already experienced whatever it is you'll do, but for you it hasn't happened yet.'

Maybe it was the throbbing pain from the bruising around his skull, but Ian found himself less able to follow the Doctor's explanation than usual. 'I'm not sure I follow you, Doctor, but I think I get the basic idea. Not sure I can believe it, mind you.'

'Well, I can believe it,' the Doctor told him, and tapped his chest with a fingertip. 'Now, you just be careful until we know more about how you will end up here.'

Ian shivered.

Barbara cleared her throat. 'And what about our unbelievable little incident?'

She and Vicki had told Ian their story too. It had amused him and lightened his mood, which he supposed was their reason for telling it. Ghosts, indeed!

The Doctor, much to Ian's surprise, was taking the story seriously. 'It sounds to me, Barbara, very much like you've found yourself a stone tape. Yes, a stone tape.'

Ian and Barbara exchanged puzzled looks.

'Stone tape?' Ian echoed.

'It's an explanation for ghosts, young man. You have certain minerals and oxides on the surface of a magnetic recording tape, yes?'

That much Ian understood. 'Yes, they form the pattern of the recording according to what electrical signals the tape machine receives. Then they're decoded and the patterns are converted to electrical signals and played out through a speaker.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Now, Chesterfield, many of those same minerals and oxides are also present in brickwork and certain types of rock formation. And those can record electrical signals just like a tape machine and play them back, d'you see?'

Ian could see what the Doctor was getting at, but a brick was very different from a piece of tape on a reel. 'But how? You'd need a pretty big tape recorder to play a wall.'

The Doctor tapped his forehead. 'The human brain, dear boy. It is simply an electrochemical machine, is it not? It generates signals that can be recorded, and so it can also decode existing recordings.'

'I think I understand,' Ian said doubtfully. 'You mean if a brain reacts the right way with one of these stone tapes, it's like putting a tape on a player? It plugs an image - a hallucination, I suppose - right into the brain?'

'Precisely so. You're learning!'

'Thank you, Doctor,' Ian said dryly. 'They say doctors make the worst patients, so I dread to think what sort of students teachers make.'

‘Ones who can’t be left alone for a minute without getting themselves into mischief.’

‘All right, I suppose I walked into that one, didn’t I?’

Ian grinned. Whether it was the medicines, the company, the food or just the Doctor’s acid humour, it had worked. Ian now found his mind turning over the Doctor’s theory about himself and the other Chesterton.

‘I’ve been thinking about what you said earlier, about me meeting those people again in my future but their past.’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, surely that means nothing can happen to us now. At least until we make that trip.’

The thought made him feel better. He might be hurting, but at least he could feel confident about walking around in this time and place, and not have to be constantly on the lookout for danger. Since boarding the Ship he’d become so accustomed to staying alert to the dangers they kept running into that he’d forgotten how much of a strain it could be. He had also forgotten how comfortable and relaxing it was not to be looking out for where the next trouble would come from.

The Doctor shook his head, clucking his tongue. ‘I’m afraid it isn’t quite as simple as that. For one thing, it’s only you who needs go back and meet those disagreeable fellows at a later date.’

‘But I can’t fly the TARDIS. Which means it can’t be just me.’

‘And nor can Barbara or Vicki, neither of whom those ruffians seemed to recognise.’

This sent a chill into Ian’s bones. Did it mean the girls didn’t make that trip - and if not, why not? He couldn’t imagine letting Barbara stay behind somewhere and travelling without her. The alternatives he could think of were worse.

‘In any case,’ the Doctor went on, ‘something could easily happen to you or me. We’re not indestructible, you know. Time doesn’t make us invulnerable just because we appear to have an appointment somewhere else.’

‘But if anything did happen to us before -’

'It would cause a paradox, and that could be a minor irritant to the universe, or a major catastrophe, but we should never know which if we're fortunate.'

Ian had never been particularly superstitious. He didn't care about walking under ladders, and could never remember whether a black cat crossing his path was supposed to be lucky or unlucky. If someone told him they had a feeling of danger when none was present - a premonition, he supposed he would call it - he would dismiss it as just a nervous fear.

None of which stopped a voice in his brain from screaming that Vicki and Barbara would be in danger here, and that they should get back to the Ship and leave as soon as they could.

The fear crept along his arms and caressed his sides, just under the skin where he couldn't brush it off. He wished he'd never had that conversation with the Doctor about being safe until they came to Canton at an earlier time.

Fei-Hung appeared in the doorway. 'Doctor. Someone wants to see you.'

'Someone?'

'His name's Jiang. He's a teacher at the *gungfu* school here, under my father.'

'Then I shall come along at once.'

Jiang had been careful to get off the carriage a few streets away and make his way into Po Chi Lam separately from the soldiers.

It would have been satisfying to see the look on Wong-sifu's face, but Jiang wasn't going to sacrifice his promotion from deputy to master for the sake of a pleasant image or a quick gloat. He had seen too many people fall by the wayside because they were emotional, rather than practical, to make the same mistake himself.

When he had seen Wong Kei-Ying boarding the carriage Jiang had run straight over, knowing that Kei-Ying, Fei-Hung and anyone else who was around would see that he was not with the soldiers, and that he was as surprised as they were.

'Sifu', he cried out in feigned, but convincing, anguish. 'What is happening?'

'It would seem I am under arrest for the moment,' Kei-Ying said.

He didn't seem too concerned, but this didn't worry Jiang. Kei-Ying had never let anything get on top of him, for as long as Jiang had studied under him.

'It is, of course, merely a misunderstanding,' Kei-Ying continued.

'Nonsense,' Jiang snapped. 'It is an outrageous slur. You need only say the word and I will deal with these guards, and-'

'No, you will not.'

Jiang waited expectantly for Kei-Ying to continue. He had no idea what he would have done if Kei-Ying had told him to go ahead.

'The school and the surgery are more important. Their names must not be besmirched.'

'I will look after them well during the moments you are absent,' Jiang promised.

'That won't be necessary,' Kei-Ying told him.

Then he smiled and there was something in this smile that Jiang didn't like. Recognition, perhaps, or worse, understanding. Wong-sifu had always been a good judge of character and this unnerved Jiang.

'The Doctor will administer the school and take over the surgery during my absence. He too is a medical man, and I sense wisdom in him.'

Jiang felt his cheeks sting and burn. 'You're turning Po Chi Lam over to that *gwailo*? I am your deputy -'

'And a good one, Jiang, but you're not ready yet. Don't worry, it won't be long.'

Then a soldier was pushing Jiang aside with a casual shove of his rifle, and the carriage was moving.

Now, looking into the Doctor's eyes, Jiang knew why Kei-Ying had chosen him. The Doctor held his gaze with the same air as Kei-Ying did, and judged his character in the same way.

‘And what can I do for you, young man?’

Jiang didn’t hesitate. ‘Accept my challenge.’

The Doctor blinked. ‘Challenge? What challenge? What are you talking about?’

Jiang smiled, but the smile remained strictly confined between his chin and his moustache. ‘It is a tradition here that the master of a school must be able to defend himself against any master of any other school. If you wish to stay master of this school, old man, you must prove yourself capable by fighting and defeating me. The day after tomorrow, at noon, Doctor.’

‘And what if Wong-sifu is back by then? Did you ever consider that?’ The Doctor didn’t wait for Jiang to answer. ‘No, I didn’t think so. You young people aren’t the considering types, are you?’

‘Consider this, *gwailo*. My most difficult task will be to decide whether to kill you or merely maim you. Make your peace with your god, and I will return on Saturday at midday.’

CHAPTER THREE

Warriors Two

I

Ian had taken the opportunity to explore Po Chi Lam while the Doctor was speaking to Jiang. Two main wings split off from the central hall, and the general effect was a cross between a rather Spartan stately home and an oriental tea-room. Unlike a western stately home the building was all on one level, though the ceiling of the hall was high enough to accommodate another floor. Everywhere within it smelt of jasmine and sweat, and warm dust creeping in through the doors.

The surgery was in the west wing and seemed to be a kind of outpatients' accident and emergency room. No-one else was staying there, but some of Kei-Ying's students were preparing herbs and spices for potions and poultices, while others applied plaster to the broken wrist of one of the martial arts students from the east wing. There was a training hall there, but it was very small as most of the training was done outside in the courtyard. There were private apartments in the east wing, but Ian didn't go into them. He felt enough of an interloper as it was, and didn't want to taint his gratitude to the Wongs by trespassing.

He felt strangely comfortable at Po Chi Lam. Something about the wood on the floors was just right. It felt not too new to have a personality of its own, and not too old. It was comfortable and assured.

'Doctor, I've been thinking,' Ian began, when he returned to the main reception hall.

The Doctor was walking slowly back into it, looking rather bemused.

'If we're staying here for a few days, perhaps we should take proper lodgings at an inn or hotel. I'm grateful to Master Wong, but I don't want to seem like a limpet -'

'And what happens the next time someone can't tell you from... you? Hmm? I should say you would have a season ticket to this surgery anyway. Besides which, if I am to be looking after this place for Master Wong, then I have to be here. And not somewhere else.'

'I thought you'd see it like that,' Ian admitted, but the Doctor had already wandered a little way off again. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes, yes, Chesterman. I was just pondering how best to engage in the duel to which I have just been challenged.'

'A duel?' Ian exclaimed. He could hardly believe what the Doctor had just told him.

Fei-Hung came running at the sound of Ian's exclamation.

'Do you know what he's talking about?' Ian hoped that, as an independent witness, the young man would be able to set his mind at ease on this point.

Fei-Hung nodded reluctantly. 'Jiang, one of my father's deputies, has challenged Doctor-sifu.'

'Yes,' the Doctor said, 'and I must say I'm quite surprised, too. But the man has issued his challenge -'

'It doesn't necessarily follow that you have to accept it!' Ian protested.

'Oh, but it does. It's the custom here, you see. Master Wong has entrusted me with looking after Po Chi Lam until we get this nonsense about his incarceration sorted out. Since there is a custom of challenging the masters of different schools, so that they may prove their worth, it would seem that I ought to accept.'

'But you're not a... a kung fu master, or whatever they call it.' Ian hesitated. The Doctor was a lot older than he seemed, and had an almost limitless amount of experience at the most surprising things. 'Are you?'

'Until Master Wong comes back, it would appear that I am. And if I am to honour his request and the trust he has placed

in me, then I must respond to this challenge as any master would.'

Fei-Hung shuffled slightly and, not meeting the Doctor's eyes, said, 'Ches- Ian is right.'

The Doctor glared at them. 'Are you implying that I'm too old?' he asked sharply. 'The old boy's past it - is that what you think?' He drew himself up proudly. 'Haven't you looked around, young man? Many of the most respected masters here are men you would probably consider frail and past their sell-by date.'

Ian winced, recognising the verbal minefield he and Fei-Hung had blundered into. He certainly didn't want the Doctor's temper to explode. 'I just meant that those medicines of yours from the TARDIS have done the trick. I feel as fit as a fiddle, and it'd be a shame to let that go to waste.'

The Doctor looked down his nose at him, clearly not fooled. 'And tell me, Chesterton, are you experienced in the martial arts? Hmm?'

Ian flexed his fists. 'I boxed a little during my National Service days, yes.'

The Doctor snorted. 'But the styles of Chinese *wuxia* are hardly Marquess of Queensbury. Do you have any experience with them?'

'No, but -'

'Exactly! In other words you'd be just as foolish as you accuse me of being, wouldn't you?'

Ian couldn't really deny this, but nor could he find the words to say that it didn't matter so much if he got beaten up again. After all, he wasn't needed to control the Ship if it came to it.

'The Doctor has a point,' Fei-Hung said to Ian. 'There are many aged masters who are more than capable of winning a bout just like this one.'

'Yes, but -'

'Some are even older than the Doctor.'

The Doctor chuckled. 'I should find that a little difficult to believe.'

'Doctor, this man is a younger, stronger expert in martial arts,' Ian said. 'How on Earth will you defeat him?'

'With brains, dear boy. The intellect. Brains will win over brawn every time, and there I have the distinct advantage, don't you think?' The Doctor chuckled to himself and looked smug.

Ian couldn't understand him. For some reason, he seemed to be relishing the prospect of the duel.

Cheng put a bottle of something on a table in the Hidden Panda, and started to drink from it. There was no label on it, and he hadn't bothered to check what it was. So long as it was alcohol, then sooner or later it would deaden his hands so that they stopped shaking, and flush away the worry about what he should do next. If it didn't, then at least it would drive him to unconsciousness and he wouldn't be thinking enough to worry.

He was still frustratingly sober, and shaking, by the time the bottle was all but empty. He swept it aside and went to his room at the back of the building, and lifted up the stone he kept the takings under. Neither the restaurant nor the honest life per se were very profitable, but there was enough for a fast horse and a small cottage somewhere in the endless, muddy fields of the northeast.

When he straightened up he found Pang looking at him with a kicked-puppy expression. 'You're leaving?'

'We're leaving,' Cheng corrected him.

'We are?'

'We are if we have any sense.'

He scooped up a handful of coins and pressed them into Pang's clammy hand. He started looking for his saddlebags, which he had kept for such a contingency. The room was such a mess of empty bottles and unwashed clothes that it could take a week to find them, but Cheng didn't let this stop him. He knew that if he stopped he'd shake and gasp for breath.

'Remember that last caravan we robbed? Two years ago?'

Pang nodded.

‘Remember the cave and the three monks?’

Pang nodded again.

‘I saw them last night.’

Pang’s head whipped around, as if the monks were sneaking up on him at that very moment. ‘They’re here? In Guangzhou.’

A moment of calm overtook Cheng, and he knew Pang would have to hear about what had happened. ‘They mutilated Lei-Fang.’

Pang’s mouth opened slightly, his eyes widening. Then his face crumpled. ‘No...’

‘Yes. And -’ Cheng’s voice broke, and he sat down on his flea-ridden cot, head in hands. ‘I didn’t do anything, Ah-Pang. I just wanted to get the hell out of there. I don’t know how they came to be above Lei-Fang in the Black Flag, but they’ve got half the militia eating out of their hands.’

‘Lei-Fang...’

Cheng nodded, and put his arm around Pang. He could barely reach.

‘We have to go. I think the abbot recognised me.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, he said -’

‘Why do we have to go?’ Pang asked patiently.

Cheng leant back. ‘You must be joking. They’ll be after us -’

‘We should be after them,’ Pang said quietly. ‘Lei-Fang was your friend.’

Cheng knew that; the little piece of emptiness in his heart was reminding him of it every moment.

‘We ran as far as we could, didn’t we?’ Pang asked.

Cheng sniffled. He wiped his nose and eyes on his sleeve.

‘I think we did.’

Fei-Hung arrived at the Hidden Panda, and almost walked straight past it because all he could see was Miss Law’s face looking up at him, bathed in moonlight. She would be worried already, and if she didn’t hear from him soon her parents would probably think he was no better than any other young man.

Fei-Hung knew he was better. Better for Miss Law, anyway. He took a couple of steps backwards and entered the Hidden Panda. The Doctor had left the scheduling of training sessions to him, and it was time to talk to Cheng about the progress of his Black Flag class.

He found Cheng and Pang at the back of the inn, sitting over a few bottles. Three were empty, the fourth was getting there.

‘He’s more than a match for us,’ Cheng was saying. ‘You remember that.’ Pang nodded.

‘And anyway, he’s one of our brothers now. Can we -’ He broke off when he saw Fei-Hung. ‘Sit down, come on. Have a drink on the house.’

Fei-Hung wasn’t stupid enough to turn down a free drink. Or he wasn’t smart enough - he never could decide which. He took a swig from the bottle and immediately wished he could cough the fire out of his throat and chest. His eyes watered and he slumped into a chair.

‘What is that?’

Cheng looked at a label. ‘Peppered vodka. No wonder the Russians are so bloody annoyed all the time.’

Fei-Hung grabbed a jug of water and poured half of it down his throat. ‘Bloody hell.’ He coughed. ‘I came in to talk about the Black Flag -’

‘Yes, we were just talking about that, and what we’re going to do.’

‘With my lather in jail I have many extra duties at Po Chi Lam. I’m not sure I’ll be able to take both training sessions this week.’

‘Neither are we. Sure we can make it, that is.’ Cheng tried to look vaguely in the direction of Fei-Hung. ‘We’ve found a moral objectification to... to... to the new guy.’

‘New guy?’

‘Some sort of abbot. He ate Lei-Fang for dinner, I think, so I’m trying to decide what to do. Kill my brother or keep running.’

Fei-Hung sighed and rose. 'I'll come back tomorrow when you're not drunk. All things in moderation, you know.' He grinned. 'But not too much.'

When Fei-Hung had gone Cheng looked at Pang. 'I don't feel drunk, do you?' Pang shook his head and fell forward on to the table, snoring.

'Oh, he meant you,' Cheng said, understanding.

Fei-Hung started towards the Law family's house, but stopped after a few yards. Something about Cheng's words triggered alarms in his head. He went back to the Hidden Panda, but Cheng and Pang were both in a drunken stupor, snores blowing bubbles from their lips.

He tried to wake them, but it was like trying to wake the dead. After a few moments Fei-Hung decided to tell the Doctor about them, and returned to Po Chi Lam.

The Doctor was experimenting with herbs and spices, consulting a notebook as he opened each jar or sachet.

'Doctor-sifu,' Fei-Hung whispered, careful not to disturb the patients in the surgery.

'Oh, it's you, young man.' The Doctor put away his notebook. 'Is anything wrong?'

'I'm not sure,' Fei-Hung admitted. 'Cheng and Pang - the men who carried your friend here when he was attacked - are behaving most oddly.'

'In what way odd?'

'Something about someone eating his brother or something.'

'Good grief! Do you mean to say cannibalism?'

'Not literally - at least I don't think so.' Fei-Hung sat back on his heels. 'I think it was something to do with the Black Flag militia. They're both members -'

'As are yourself and your father.'

Fei-Hung gave a guilty start. 'Well, yes. But I get the impression that something is happening. A coup in the ranks, perhaps.'

'Life is a matter of shifting balances and changing allegiances,' the Doctor said. 'Whether we like it or not doesn't

make a difference. In any case, it's not my place to interfere in your local politics.'

'I was just wondering if the politics were interfering with you.' Fei-Hung lowered his voice. 'Jiang is also a member, and he is ambitious.'

'I see,' the Doctor said wearily. He sat down with a sigh. 'You know, I do so wish people would stop trying to involve me in other people's affairs. Or their own.'

Major Chesterton had finished writing out the report on the morning's arrest, and a small snifter from the drinks cabinet in his office had helped relax him and ease him into the paperwork. He wished he knew just how reliable this Jiang was. Anderson and Logan seemed to trust him well enough - as much as either of them trusted any Chinaman - but Chesterton couldn't help dwelling on the fact that the man was betraying his own superior.

No officer and gentleman would do such a thing for his own advancement, but Jiang didn't have the eyes of a gentleman. He had the eyes of a snake, and the tongue of its charmer.

Chesterton wondered briefly if his opinion was merely instinct, or if he had had some experience of the man before. He read over the report and visualised Jiang's waxed, droopy moustache, and hoped this would trigger a memory. It didn't, so, tossing the report away with a snap of the wrist, he decided to try another tack. He would go and speak to the prisoner.

He went over to the glasshouse at the western end of the garrison, and ordered the private on duty to open the door to Kei-Ying's cell. The middle-aged Chinaman was sitting on the floor in the lotus position. Probably asleep, Chesterton thought, though no doubt the man would call it meditation.

'Good evening, Major,' Kei-Ying said without opening his eyes. 'How can I help you?'

Chesterton wasn't sure what to ask. 'Did we know each other before?'

'I believe so, but only briefly,' Kei-Ying said.

'You say you treated me once.'

‘Yes. Last night.’

‘You know I can’t accept that. But I can believe you’re simply mistaken about when it was.’

Kei-Ying opened one eye. It was calm and clear, and, in a way, relaxing. It put Chesterton at ease. ‘Can you?’

‘Yes.’ Chesterton stepped into the cell and sat on the cot against one of the walls. He knew Kei-Ying could probably take him with that strange type of boxing the Chinese did, but he didn’t see any sign of hostility in the man’s eyes. ‘If you know me, what do you think of me? What sort of man am I?’

‘You have always seemed a fair man. Open-minded, chivalrous, brave and caring. Loyal to your friends.’

‘Sounds like a proper chivalrous knight,’ Chesterton said wistfully. He held up his glass to the light, examining the liquor. But it doesn’t sound much like the man I hear talk about. The one whom half of Kwantung wants to punch in the face.’

‘Perhaps something happened to you, changed you.’

‘Maybe. People do change, don’t they? And not always for the better. My old dad used to say that.’

‘He sounds like a wise man.’

‘You only say that because you don’t know him. He was a drunkard and a gambler, and couldn’t tell the difference between his marriage bed and a whorehouse.’ Chesterton’s mood had changed now and he sighed. ‘Is there a reason for the hatred I get when I show my face in your streets? Or is it just because I’m the symbol of a foreign law?’

Kei-Ying closed his eyes for a moment. ‘I hear tell of villages being burnt, ships attacked by pirates, caravans falling prey to banditry... but not of raiders being arrested or murderers and bandits caught. We don’t hate you because of what you do. We despair at what you fail to do. We know a Han government could keep the order you fail to deliver. And we know we would avenge the sons and daughters whose deaths don’t seem to divert you from your plunder.’

Chesterton stood up. ‘We’ll talk again in the morning.’

He didn't look back as the private re-locked the cell door. He walked more slowly on the return journey to his office. There must be a reason why he was so weak, so powerless. He slumped into his chair. Perhaps if he dozed off his troubles would disappear in the night. Trying to solve them just seemed to breed more and more problems.

He took out the frame that contained the pictures of himself and the striking woman, and touched her face. It didn't connect him to her any more than just looking did, but he pretended it did. He pretended his fingertips were brushing over soft skin, and that he was rewarded with the breath of a kiss. He pretended he knew who she was, in the hope that his pretence would come true and his life would make sense again.

She didn't speak, or blink, or blow a kiss. His fingertips hissed over paper until he snapped the frame shut. Where was this woman now, he wondered? The inscription made it clear that she and he were lovers, so why was she not with him? Was she looking after their children, back in England? Did she leave him for a man who would be there at night, and not travelling the globe? Was she pining over an identical picture of him, her heart soon to break because he had forgotten to write this week?

Any other explanation was too painful to think about. If he had lost her, a loss repeated or, worse, relived, would be a loss more than just doubled.

It was almost sunset when Cheng woke. Pang was still snoring, and perhaps this was the noise that had woken him. He groaned and found a pitcher of water to drain. Beyond Pang, a few more crates of the vodka were stacked near the door ready for delivery to the Scottish sergeant major.

Cheng found he had no enthusiasm for completing the job, but then he remembered the way Anderson had talked about his daughter. Maybe he wasn't a bad man for a *gwailo*. It occurred to him that perhaps the sergeant major could be of use to him in his dilemma, especially if he could talk the Scotsman into helping him.

Cheng opened the door and started lugging the crates outside. He had the wagon loaded in record time, and was soon clattering off to Sa Meen island, which the Wongs, who were not Cantonese, called Xamian. He had no trouble getting across the pontoon bridge that linked the island garrison to the riverside. By now the guards were used to his wagon with its legitimate deliveries and its special cargoes for Sergeant Major Anderson.

He stopped the wagon at the wash house and waited for Anderson to appear. Every part of his brain was rebelling, telling him he was drunk and should run like hell. Cheng ignored this, and soon saw Anderson emerging from the cookhouse on the corner. He hissed to him and Anderson turned. The sergeant major's eyes widened and he marched over to Cheng at double time, his eyes flicking left and right.

He pushed Cheng into the shadows between two barrack blocks. 'What are ye doing here?'

'Delivering the rest of your order.'

'And d'ye expect me just to hand boxes of ammunition over to a Chinee in front of everyone? Jesus Christ!'

'No, I don't want it any more. Here it is, the remainder of your crates. Don't drink it all at once.'

Anderson snorted. 'I wouldn't let a drop of this devil's brew past my lips to save my life. But it'll bring a good profit.'

Cheng laughed. 'Buy yourself a ticket home, my friend. You've told me enough about Megan that I know you are a good father. You should go home and be one.'

'Are ye threatening me, trying to get rid of me? Or trying to warn me about something?'

Cheng hesitated. 'I'm not sure,' he admitted.

'I suppose it depends whose side you're on.'

Cheng shook his head. 'I don't know who's on what side any more.'

Anderson frowned.

'There's something else I want instead,' Cheng said.

'And that would be?'

'To talk to Wong Kei-Ying.'

Barbara couldn't get enough of seeing Ian up on his feet, behaving normally. Normalcy wasn't something people usually considered wonderful, but today she felt that Ian being normal was wonderful. It was wonderful because normalcy meant he wasn't ill, he wasn't in pain and his life wasn't fading before her eyes.

'You look like you've won the pools,' he had said earlier.

'I did. The jackpot.' His face had softened then, and she had held him for a long minute. 'I thought -'

'I know. I've been there. There and back again.'

Barbara chuckled. 'That's a thought, actually. We saw that house last night, but I wonder if -'

'- if it's still there in the cold light of day?' Ian nodded to himself, rubbing a sore spot on his chin. 'I think some fresh air might do me good, actually. And it looks like being a nice day. I'll just go and tell...' He fell silent with a grimace.

'Trouble?' Barbara asked, seeing the darkness in Ian's expression. She felt a sudden weakness at the thought that the Doctor's medicine might be wearing off. What if Ian's injuries were causing a relapse?

'Are you hurt? Is the Doctor's medicine wearing off?'

'No,' he said with a sigh. 'It's this duel of the Doctor's. He must be mad.'

'I expect he knows what he's doing, and has some kind of plan,' she lied. Ian had had enough to worry about since they arrived here without this as well.

'I hope you're right.'

'You know I am. It's not the first time he's got into a scrap.'

'With an expert?'

'Ian Chesterton,' she said in her best classroom voice, 'I do believe you just like to look for things to worry about. It's as if you're addicted to it.'

'Believe me,' Ian said with a smile, 'I'd be only too happy never to find a problem again. It's not my fault if worries keep finding me.'

‘Then I’m taking you to somewhere that they won’t find you. Or if they do, at least they might help settle the questions I’ve been asking myself since last night.’

‘As my lady commands,’ Ian quipped, with a faintly ridiculous courtly bow that belonged in one of Coal Hill School’s drama group productions. ‘Actually, maybe we should ask the Doctor to come with us. He seemed to have more ideas about this house of yours than I might have.’

Barbara grinned. ‘He’s on teaching duty, and it’s an extended midterm break for us.’

‘There is that,’ he had agreed, and so they had gone.

Ian borrowed a hat to shade his eyes and partly cover his face, so that no-one would recognise him as they passed through Canton.

Barbara had been half-afraid - more than half, if truth be told - that the house would be gone. After all, none of them had noticed it on their original journey into Canton the previous morning, and she had an unreasoning suspicion that it had appeared just for last night’s performance.

Her fears were unfounded. The house was still there, its colours muted and dusty, all the paintwork it had ever had faded by long years under the sun.

Ian had been half-expecting something Charles Addams might have drawn, then, remembering where he was, had amended his mental image to a sprawling pagoda with lots of dark windows and bats in the rafters.

What Barbara led him to was just a little bungalow, built in a typical Chinese plaster-and-tile fashion. In the daylight the house was rather grimy and run-down, but it didn’t look at all threatening or spooky to him.

‘Are you sure this is the place?’ he asked.

Barbara nodded. ‘It looked quite different last night.’

‘It must have done, from what you and Vicki told us.’

There were roses growing around an old bench and table outside. The door was still solid, but it was ajar and Ian pushed experimentally against it. It was stiff, but opened under relatively little pressure and he went into the house.

Although it had rained overnight, the interior didn't smell damp. Rather, it smelt of warm clay, with the scent of flowers keeping it fresh. It made the air a little thicker than Ian would have liked, but certainly not unpleasant.

The large room was dark even in the morning sunshine. Moss had taken hold in the walls and there was no sign of furniture. The only footprints in the dust on the bare floorboards were his own. A couple of other smaller rooms were separated from the big one by wooden partitions. Ian went through to the one on the left and found a large, wooden table and empty shelves. It was clearly a kitchen. The other room was as empty as the first, but Ian was fairly sure it must have been a bedroom.

'It doesn't look like anybody's lived here for years,' Barbara said.

She was standing in the larger, main room, looking around. Perhaps it was Ian's imagination, but it seemed unusually quiet in the house. It wasn't just that the walls blocked the sounds outside, of birds and rustling leaves, but their voices seemed muted in some way.

'No.' Ian looked around. It was a nice enough house, but seemed forgotten in its corner of the roadside. He didn't believe in ghosts, but shivered nonetheless. 'Still, it's a handy place to shelter from some rain.'

'And not leave any footprints?'

Ian could only shrug. 'You came in last night, didn't you? Yet you didn't leave any footprints either and we both know you're not a ghost. This must be a different house. The one you sheltered in must be somewhere else along the road. Either we've missed it already or we haven't reached it yet.'

'And this one?'

'This one would be easy to miss in the dark.'

'Ian, it is this house. I recognise it. That little table outside, the rose bush, the well.'

'It's probably the typical layout for a house in this time and place. And even if it was this house, I can guarantee you there's a more rational explanation than ghosts and ghouls and things that go bump in the night.'

‘Such as?’

Ian hesitated, trying to think of a single rational explanation. ‘I dunno... Perhaps some more dust shook loose from the ceiling after you left and covered up the prints.’

‘That’s even more far-fetched and you know it, Ian! For one thing it would need the dust to be lying on the ceiling while Vicki and Fei-Hung and I were here. You might be the scientist, Ian, but I think that if anyone had repealed the law of gravity it would have been mentioned in a lot of very important history books.’

‘I suppose you’re right. Actually, I’m beginning to wonder a little more about this “stone tape” theory of the Doctor’s.’

Barbara laughed. ‘That was rather outlandish, wasn’t it? It was all Greek to me. I don’t suppose you have a better idea of how believable it is?’

Ian had been thinking about it. Earlier he would have said the theory was pure science fiction, but now he wasn’t so sure. He knelt beside a wall and used a penknife to scrape some plaster away from the bricks.

‘The Doctor could have a point. Tapes do record and read signals by magnetically affecting particles of iron oxide and the like.’ He tapped the wall. ‘And there are iron oxides in bricks like these...’ He stood up. ‘I think I’d like to keep an open mind about it, at least.’

Barbara stepped outside the house and went round the corner. Ian stayed where he was, looking for signs of hidden doors or some way out at the back. He didn’t find anything.

‘Ian!’ Barbara shouted suddenly, ‘Come quickly!’

Ian was moving at once, crashing through the overgrown garden to the back of the house. Barbara was keeling in a clearing, rubbing at a plank of wood that jutted up from a low rise. She wasn’t in any danger, so he slowed to a walk to cover the rest of the distance.

‘What is it?’

‘Ian, I think it’s a grave.’

Ian looked at the plank. It was carved with Chinese characters that he couldn’t read. ‘It looks like one, I agree. But what difference does that make?’

‘Perhaps it’s hers; the girl from last night, I mean.’

Ian suppressed a laugh. ‘Why should it be? This could be anybody’s grave - if it even is a grave.’ He pointed to the inscription. ‘Unless you’ve suddenly developed an ability to read that.’

‘No, I just have... I don’t know, a feeling.’

He was tempted to push the issue further but something about her tone stopped him. She was serious and, while she had no proof, neither did he. It was just a matter of her feeling against his, and he knew she wasn’t really any more superstitious or gullible than he was. Her earnestness also surprised him, and he liked it when this happened. They’d been travelling together in the Ship for two years now, and knew each other pretty well, but moments like this still kept her surprising and fresh.

He realised she was looking at him while he was standing there smiling, and cleared his throat.

‘You seem happy,’ she said.

‘I was just thinking about this place. This isn’t too bad an era, Barbara. The height of the British Empire, London the premier city of the world. Not a bad era to live in.’

‘I suppose not. But what would our children think? Workhouses? The trenches? The Blitz?’

‘You’ve got a point there.’ He looked back at the house, then at Barbara. ‘“Our” children?’

‘The human race’s generally.’

‘Oh.’

Barbara looked at the house again, thoughtfully. ‘She said something, you know.’

‘Who? The girl last night?’

‘Yes. She said that her only regret was not seizing the day. Apparently someone she loved said he’d go off to the army if she didn’t want him, and she didn’t talk him out of it. When he got killed she realised her mistake.’

Ian had heard this story before, several times. ‘It’s a traditional ghost story plot, I’ll give you that.’ He squatted beside the grave, if a grave it was, and patted it. ‘Perhaps this is his,

rather than hers. Maybe she comes up from the city now and again to tend it, and got caught in the rain.'

This, Ian felt, would satisfactorily explain Barbara's encounter without recourse to the supernatural.

'You're probably right,' she admitted. 'It's hard to tell the ages of Chinese girls. I suppose she could have been older than I thought.'

Something in her voice sounded different and alerted Ian. He had the sudden uncomfortable feeling that they had been talking at cross-purposes, and that something was about to hit him out of the blue, but he couldn't think what. All he knew was that his stomach was suddenly jittery about what it might be.

He realised what was going to happen, just a heartbeat before Barbara kissed him.

'What are you doing?'

'Seizing the day.'

'I thought we'd seized this day before.'

Eighteen hundred years before, he added mentally.

'But I didn't say I love you. And I do.' So saying, she kissed him again.

Major Chesterton dozed in his quarters, trying to seek respite in unconsciousness. Whichever way he lay seemed to make the ache in his skull feel worse, which was as frustrating as it was tiring.

Finally, he gave up and went to the officers' mess for something to eat. On the way he met Anderson walking with an old man Chesterton had never seen before. The old boy had long, silver hair and was wearing a frock coat and checked trousers, with only a panama hat of sorts acknowledging the warmer environment.

'Major Chesterton, I presume,' he began before Anderson could introduce him. 'I had rather been hoping to meet you.'

'I like to think of myself as approachable, Mr...?'

'Oh, just Doctor will do.'

'Doctor?' Had Logan sent for this man? The captain had been expressing a lot of concern about Chesterton's head

injury lately. Had he become suspicious enough of its effects to bring in a medical man against his wishes? The man was vaguely familiar, but Chesterton couldn't place him.

'That's right.' The Doctor leant slightly on his cane and shook his head sadly. Chesterton could see lost hope in his stance, and disappointment too.

'I was rather hoping that I could pick your brains on a matter,' the Doctor said, 'but I don't think now that I'll be able to.'

'I don't see why not.' Chesterton chewed his lower lip for a moment, deliberating, then said, 'Let's go to my office. We can talk there.' He wasn't sure he wanted to talk, especially to a doctor, but maybe some good would come of it.

The Doctor followed him back to his office and stood for a moment, looking around at the collection of souvenirs. 'You're still a traveller, I see.'

'Yes,' Chesterton replied happily. 'The army keeps me moving around. Sometimes we have to teach someone a lesson, but other than that I enjoy it.'

'Other than that?'

'I don't much like hurting people. At least, I don't think I do.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'How very unusual. A man who doesn't know whether he likes violence.'

'Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent.'

'A very healthy attitude. Yes, very healthy. Though I think perhaps violence is more the first refuge of the incompetent.'

Chesterton laughed. 'You might be right there.'

He went to a small drinks cabinet and lifted out a bottle of brandy. 'Care for a snifter? For purely medicinal purposes, of course.'

'That's very generous of you, sir. Yes, thank you.'

'I keep some around to chase away the aches and pains. Age doesn't come by itself.'

'Indeed not,' the Doctor agreed as Chesterton poured. 'And what aches and pains are those? Perhaps I might be able to help?'

Chesterton froze, his suspicion that Logan had sent the Doctor resurfacing. He handed his visitor a glass of brandy and decided that if the game was up, it was up. 'I took a fall from my horse while chasing some bandits out of Qiang-Ling, and landed on my head. Since then, most things prior to that have been a blank.'

He sat back and gazed at the group photograph of himself with his staff at Jaipur. 'This post, these men and the souvenirs in here are all I have, and all I know. I don't remember how long I've been here or what my family did before I joined the army... If anyone found out that I was hiding this damnable...', he tapped his skull, '...void, it would be straight back to England.'

The Doctor nodded to himself, as if he were measuring this information against something else he knew.

'I see. A side effect of a concussion, I wonder?'

Chesterton winced as even the word sent another bolt of pain through his head. 'Oh, I have a concussion all right. The granddaddy of them all.'

The Doctor seemed to reach a decision. 'Your secret is safe with me, Major. And, as it happens, I think I can arrange some painkillers for you. A herbal remedy. You may or may not know that I'm looking after Po Chi Lam surgery for the moment?'

'I heard someone was looking after it.'

'I shall have some analgesics sent up. But I should like to ask for something in return. I would like to speak to Kei-Ying.'

Chesterton wasn't sure about letting this stranger see the prisoner, but then he also wasn't sure the prisoner was guilty of anything. And the man wasn't a Chinese, so he was hardly likely to try to break Kei-Ying out of jail. And, for some reason he couldn't fathom at all, Chesterton found that he trusted the Doctor.

Wong Kei-Ying rested on the floor of his cell, even though there was a cot. The cell in the Xamian Island prison was small, but at least he had it to himself - if he didn't count the

rat in the corner. It smelt of the grime and mould that had taken hold in the small channels between the bricks, but it was still cleaner than he could have expected if he had been sent to a Guangzhou prison. Here he wasn't sharing his captivity with a couple of dozen others, some of whom would be dead under the straw.

In the distance he could hear the garrison at work: shouts, clanging, murmured conversations. The scent of the foul form of tea the white man liked, laced with sugar, paid him a fleeting visit, but didn't come all the way in to his cell.

Suddenly he heard keys jangle at the end of the corridor outside. He resisted the urge to look to see who it was and whether they were coming to his cell. The short soldier - the one who looked as though someone had been practising Iron Palm techniques on his face - appeared outside the bars, and started to unlock the door. Kei-Ying rose smoothly to meet him.

'Visitor for ye,' the man said. He opened the cell door and the Doctor stepped inside.

'Doctor,' Kei-Ying greeted him. 'I hope everything is going well.'

'As well as can be expected. Your cousin Yee is a very adept nurse, my friend, and follows orders very well. And that son of yours doesn't seem to have let the change in management interfere with his training, either his own or the training of others.'

'He's a good man,' Kei-Ying said.

'Not everyone is as accommodating as your son,' the Doctor admitted. 'As a matter of fact I have received - and, I might say, accepted - my first challenge.'

'Challenge? To a duel?' Kei-Ying hadn't expected this. He had thought the Doctor would simply take over the surgery and the administration of the school. There was no reason to challenge him as if he were a master. 'Who?'

'A young man in your employ, named Jiang.'

'Jiang? I might have guessed.' The man was a hothead and always had been. He was also good at what he did. 'I'm sorry, Doctor. I had no idea this might happen. If you can persuade

the English to let my son visit me, I will have him make sure Jiang's challenge is withdrawn.'

'You will do no such thing, sir! As a matter of fact I intend to go ahead with the match.'

'You don't have to.'

The Doctor leant on his walking stick, and his expression softened. 'I have never been one to back down from difficulties. And if I do, your staff would have reason to believe me unworthy of the trust you place in me.'

Kei-Ying couldn't help but smile. The Doctor was indomitable, and showed iron in his backbone. He would make an excellent Han, if not for the misfortune of being born in the west.

Jiang knelt before the abbot once more, one knee and both fists on the junk's deck, keeping his eyes lowered.

'My Lord, I have discredited the man who would most oppose your position in the Black Flag. He is in jail and cannot harm us. I have also challenged the man he forced into my rightful place, a *gwailo* who calls himself the Doctor.'

Jiang felt sudden heat on his head, the sensation of being a little too close to a lamp. When the abbot spoke again Jiang had to restrain himself from committing the disrespect of looking up at his face to see if it was still him who was speaking. The voice was different, louder, yet more distant, an echoing sound from the depths of hell. 'Describe this hu-this man.'

Jiang found that his voice refused to work until he had swallowed a few times. 'He...he is a *gwailo*, of normal height for a Han. He has long, white hair and a nose like a hawk.'

'And his companions? Do they wear strange clothes?'

'Yes, a new fashion from Europe, I think.'

'But you have never seen such a material before?'

'No... no, I haven't. It is not silk, or cotton, or wool, or -'

'You have told me enough. This man who calls himself the Doctor is known. He must be destroyed.'

'Yes, my Lord. I will kill him.'

Major Chesterton walked along the north wall of the fortress at Xamian, taking in the fresh air. There was a hint of sea salt breezing in from the delta to the south. Behind him, men were drilling on the parade ground, and to either side sentries strolled around the walls. Across the river, Kwantung city's waterfront was jumbled together in a thoroughly chaotic way.

Chesterton liked it. It was a symptom of a natural growth, not some imposition of order, and this appealed to him. Though he enjoyed the ordered and regimented life of a soldier, he preferred to have nature around him. He wondered if being outdoors was part of the reason he had joined the army. He didn't fancy the idea of spending his whole adult life working in an office or a factory, trapped indoors out of the fresh air.

The diabolical agony that had impaled his head for the last few days was finally abating, thanks to the powders the Doctor had delivered - along with a strong warning not to drink brandy with them. His headache was down to being a low throbbing above his ears, which was moderately annoying, but thankfully it no longer felt as though a red-hot poker had been slid through his head from ear to ear.

With his headache finally fading, calm came over him at last. He knew it was really just normalcy returning, but for the moment it felt like a wave of happiness and calm at the centre of his life. The last time he had felt this was in Italy, watching the sunrise in the afterglow of making love.

He resisted the urge to shout with joy. He had remembered something! He and the dark-haired woman from the photograph in his office, making love in a villa. If there was anything better in life than the touch of a lover's lips, he had yet to find it. He wondered where she was now, and why she wasn't here in China with him. The joy left him, though a part of it remained, just close enough to suggest that things were going to be fine and that he needn't worry.

He didn't feel any pain or heartache when he thought about her, so he doubted that she had left him or died. More likely she was waiting for him somewhere. The truth was undoubtedly buried in some part of his scrambled brain, but he could hardly ask Logan or Anderson about details of his own love life.

He descended from the wall, wondering how many of the soldiers on duty knew him better than he currently did himself.

Logan watched Major Chesterton from the armoury door. The major looked a little better to him, and Logan was mentally grateful to the Doctor for helping. He wasn't quite right yet, though, and this made Logan sad.

He had surreptitiously taken on a few extra duties, taking the workload off the major, and felt the extra effort and fewer hours for sleeping were worth it. The major deserved every chance to get better.

Ian and Barbara arrived back at Po Chi Lam to find the Doctor glaring at three rows of children in the warm and welcoming courtyard. He himself stood on the veranda that held the courtyard in a relaxed embrace. The children wore grey smocks and were sinking into leg stretches. This seemed to be the intent, anyway. But half of them were running around yelling and threatening to bowl over the others.

'You there, stop that!' the Doctor said, pointing his cane at a boy who was trying to leapfrog over one of the children who was stretching.

Neither Ian nor Barbara could suppress their laughter. The Doctor threw them a withering look. 'And what are you two chuckling about, pray?'

Ian cleared his throat to stifle the laughter, and put on a mock-serious tone. 'We were just admiring your skills, Doctor.'

Yes,' Barbara agreed. 'It's very important to pass on knowledge and educate the young. We would never dismiss such

an important task. But you have to admit you seem to be having trouble keeping discipline.'

'And what do you suggest I should do, eh? Give them a sound spanking?' This last was directed more at the misbehaving children than the two teachers.

'Ah,' Ian said. He tutted theatrically. 'So quick to violence.'

He lowered his voice, so only Barbara could hear. 'All the same, I think I'm very happy I didn't become a junior-school teacher.'

'Me too.' Barbara raised her voice and addressed the Doctor: 'Perhaps if you demonstrated?'

Ian snorted, trying and failing to imagine the Doctor doing the splits. 'Those who can, do, those who can't, teach?' he offered.

'And those who can't teach, try to teach teachers,' the Doctor replied acidly.

'Touché.' Ian walked round the edge of the courtyard to the veranda, and Barbara followed him. 'Barbara's right about the demonstration,' he said more seriously. 'There must be a more senior student here who could do that for you.'

'My dear fellow,' the Doctor said, his tetchiness apparently an illusion. 'How very kind of you to offer.'

Before Ian could ask what he meant, the Doctor had handed him a sheet with diagrams of warming-up exercises on it. This is what they need to be doing. I'll just go and fetch a senior student.'

He scuttled off with surprising speed, chuckling to himself.

Ian bit his tongue to hold in the curse that wanted to burst forth. Barbara patted his shoulder in sympathy. 'There are two of us,' she said. 'We'll manage.'

Vicki and Fei-Hung were having lunch and watching the exercise class through a window. Fei-Hung seemed distracted and Vicki knew he must be worried about his father. She understood his sense of loss all too well, though she envied him the fact that he would see his father again.

'They work well as a team,' Fei-Hung said, nodding towards Ian and Barbara, who had gone into full teaching mode. 'It's

rare that a man and wife share the same trade, but I think I like the idea.'

Vicki giggled. 'They're not man and wife. They're just friends. Remember?'

Fei-Hung looked sceptical. 'I still think they are married, inside.'

Vicki shook her head. 'At least, I don't think so.'

'Then they should be. And you should be thinking about marriage soon, too.' Vicki nearly choked on her tea. She wondered if this was his idea of flirting. Or, if she was honest with herself, she hoped rather than wondered.

'You're not married yet, are you?'

'Not yet. But I have a fiancée. Her name is Law.'

His smile was a mix of desire and contentment, and Vicki found herself responding to it with a sinking feeling. Fei-Hung looked through the window again. 'What happened this week makes me wonder. If I were injured like Ian - or worse - how would she feel?'

Vicki tried to think of something practical to say. 'If she loves you, I suppose she'd want to look after you.'

'She does, and she would. It's just... It would affect her life. The fear and worry... I'm not sure I could put her, or anyone, through that.'

'I wouldn't worry about that,' Vicki said. 'I think it just means you love her too.'

'And you? Have you ever been in love?'

'I'm not sure,' she admitted. 'I think so.'

'Was this a boy on your ship? Or at home?'

'There were no boys my age on the ship.' She got up, a little red-faced. 'I'd better go and see if the Doctor needs any help,' she said abruptly.

Fei-Hung nodded politely.

If the small fishing town had a name - and all towns did - the abbot had no idea what it was. Names of places didn't matter, except to those who lived there and called them home. 'Home' was a name that could well be applied to everywhere.

The sky was smeared with the aftertaste of smoke and ash, and the air was filled with the shouts of guards ordering raggedly dressed prisoners to work. Patrols of armoured men wearing black silk armbands and flattened basket-like hats moved through the streets.

Most of the larger buildings were still standing, with armoured guards outside and off-duty troops inside, crashed out into exhausted sleep in their underwear. By the riverside the thin masts of small, flat-bottomed fishing boats stuck up from the waters. The boats were submerged and their masts, some broken or charred, were tilted at odd angles. A large junk was moored by the only jetty, guarded by troops with rifles.

A monastery sat at the other end of the town. It was built of brick, plaster and tile, all raised on a sort of embankment of stones. Terraced gardens, exercise areas and stairways surrounded it. The walls were stained with scorch marks.

Inside, all religious trappings had been removed. A statue stood in each of the four corners of the main hall. All four were life-sized and in the shape of a man in armour. Where a large smiling Buddha statue had once sat, the abbot now gazed down from a throne. He regretted the destruction of parts of the town but it had been necessary. Sometimes, he reflected, one had to cut away at infected tissue to preserve the whole. He was more relaxed than he had been on the junk; he preferred dry land under his feet. Land was solid and supported people. It didn't swallow them the way the sea and rivers did.

He could sense Zhao and Gao approaching, and was glad to receive them. Their service had been exemplary. The two men approached and saluted, right fist cupped in left palm. 'My Lord,' they said together.

They exchanged a glance, each seeming to offer the other the chance to speak first.

'We have brought the astrologers you require,' Gao said. 'There are but three, but they seem as competent as any.'

'Bring them in, General.'

Gao nodded to a guard waiting in the doorway, who immediately stepped aside. Three middle-aged men in the dark robes and skullcaps of court scholars shuffled fearfully in. Three guards flanked them.

‘Do you know who I am?’ the abbot asked.

‘Leader of the Black Flag,’ one of them said. ‘Lei-Fang’s... replacement.’

‘Yes. Do you love China?’

There was a chorus of affirmative replies from the astrologers.

The abbot was pleased. It was good to know that patriotism hadn’t waned over the centuries. ‘Good. What I ask of you is for China. To restore it to its rightful rulers.’

The astrologers all nodded understandingly.

‘Ask anything of us, my Lord,’ the first astrologer, the oldest of the three, said obsequiously, ‘and we shall not rest until it is completed.’

The abbot nodded. It was rewarding to see his love for his people repaid this way. They would do anything for him. ‘An event will happen soon. In the heavens. A conjunction of several stars and planets will occur on the night of a lunar eclipse. You must calculate for me the exact moment that this conjunction will occur, in Earth date and time.’

‘In “Earth...”?’

‘Yes. I must know precisely how long it is until the alignment.’

The astrologers looked at each other, each trying to guess what the other might say.

‘We will begin the observations and calculations at once,’ the leader of the group said at last.

At sundown Fei-Hung had found himself a quiet spot in the evening air to go through his *jiao shi*, which the Japanese called *kata*. It was a *quart fa*, an unarmed *jiao shi* routine. His father’s teacher, Luk Ah Choi, had taught him that *jiao shi* were best practised at either sunrise, sunset or midnight. Those were the best times to aid the circulation of *chi* throughout the body.

Going through the motions of a *quan fa* routine by himself should have freed Fei-Hung's mind from worrying about his father. It should have relaxed him and helped him to feel at one with his country, his people and himself.

His body was so accustomed to the routine that it flowed smoothly from one stance to the next, shifting its balance perfectly without any conscious thought from him. His mind should have soared, but it remained weighed down by the bonds and chains that Fei-Hung was sure were wrapped around his father in the cell at Xamian.

When he had finished, his arms and legs were shaking and he didn't know why. Sadness and frustration took as many forms as fear, he supposed, and often took the same toll on the body.

Punching and kicking at shadows and air, dodging only the breeze and the occasional moth, didn't help to free his father, or even feel as satisfying as hitting his father's jailers would be. Hoping the exertion would at least help him to sleep, Fei-Hung walked back to the main hall and up the steps to the door.

He stopped, sensing his father's former presence in the very wood of the doorframe. It taunted him, reminding him of Kei-Ying's current absence. With a muttered curse, he turned back again and sat on the top step.

Fei-Hung sensed movement behind him, but didn't look round. It was the tread of the old man, the Doctor.

'I trust I'm not disturbing you, young man?' the Doctor asked.

'No.'

'Good, good.' The Doctor leant on his cane and looked up into the clear night sky. 'I really wish things hadn't turned out this way, you know. In many ways, I suppose I feel it's my fault. But I don't think you need to worry too much. Master Wong will be released sooner or later.'

Fei-Hung stared at the gates. 'I can't go and rescue him, yet I can't stay in here and sleep, and not have at least tried to free him.' He looked around, the courtyard suddenly alien to

him, neither home as he had known it, nor a known destination. 'I don't belong any more.'

'We all feel that way from time to time, young man,' the Doctor said.

'Do we? Is that why you travel?'

'Partly, my boy, yes. But at the same time, if you don't belong in one place perhaps it's because you belong everywhere. Did you ever consider that? Hmm?'

Fei-Hung shook his head. 'Are you suggesting I should run away?' he spat. 'Or hide?'

'Not a bit of it, and don't you take that tone with me, young man!'

The Doctor's anger was palpable, and Fei-Hung raised a hand involuntarily to soothe the sting he thought he felt at his cheek.

'There are many journeys that are made with the mind, or the heart,' the Doctor said. 'The search for truth, or for right, for example.'

'I always thought one travelled on foot, or on a horse, or a ship...' Fei-Hung wasn't sure what the Doctor meant by mental travel. 'The mind goes with you, doesn't it? You might as well say one could travel, oh, I don't know, across the stars.'

'And what would you say if I told you it was possible to travel among the stars, just as people travel on ships across the sea?'

Fei-Hung laughed. 'I'd say you and Wan Hu would have enjoyed each other's company.'

'Wan who?'

'A scribe and astronomer who wanted to go up among the stars he loved to watch.'

'Really? I wouldn't mind meeting him some day.'

'I fear you're a bit late for that, Doctor. He lived nearly four hundred years ago.'

'Did he? I see.' The Doctor tutted. 'Well, some day... And you know about this fellow?'

Fei Hung nodded. 'He thought rockets and gunpowder could be used to make man fly to the stars. So he fitted two

kites to his best throne, and the forty-seven biggest rockets he could find.'

'Yes,' the Doctor prompted doubtfully.

'When the flying chair was built Wan Hu dressed himself in robes fitting for the ascent into heaven. Then he had forty-seven servants each light one of the fuses simultaneously. Then there was a huge bang as all the rockets went off at once. When the smoke blew away there was no sign of Wan Hu or his flying chair. According to legend, the servants assumed this meant the chair had worked and Wan Hu had flown into the stars, never to return.'

The Doctor listened with raised eyebrows. 'Hmm. A somewhat optimistic appraisal of his situation, don't you think?'

Fei-Hung smiled wistfully. 'He followed the dream he believed in and, one way or the other, ascended to the heavens. I always liked him, and his story.'

He relaxed, dreaming of his father walking free. He could see the cell in front of him as clearly as if he had gone to Xamian, and hear Kei-Ying's voice.

'Thank you, Doctor-sifu.'

The Doctor merely smiled.

4

Cheng was frustrated by Anderson stringing him along about seeing Kei-Ying, a promise which he hadn't yet made good on. Trying to get permission was like trying to see something with his glass eye - and he didn't want to risk arrest by returning to Xamian Island. Nor did he want to get Anderson into trouble. In the end, he settled for waiting outside a brothel he had seen the Scotsman frequent. It was payday for the British soldiers, and this meant that those who engaged the services of the whores would be with them tonight.

He steeled himself with half a bottle of rice wine, and leant against a wall across the street. He could simply have waited in the brothel's entrance hall, but the day he could resist a woman would be the day he died, and he didn't want to miss Anderson for the sake of a roll in bed.

Eventually the pug-nosed Scot appeared looking a little flushed, but grinning like a dope fiend. Cheng hurried across.

‘Anderson...’ He didn’t look at the Scotsman; he couldn’t bear to. ‘I need to be able to talk to Wong-sifu.’

‘What about?’

‘Does that matter?’ Cheng knew it did, of course. The Europeans wouldn’t want people conspiring against them in their own cells. Nor would they be likely to believe he wasn’t doing so.

‘That depends on what ye need to talk about.’

‘An internal Guangzhou militia matter.’ He could feel Anderson’s eyes on the back of his head. He could hear the man’s suspicions as if he was shouting them from the roof top. ‘All right. An internal Black Flag matter,’ he said.

He turned to Anderson. ‘Something is happening among the Black Flag. Something bad. Maybe even a threat to your people.’

The sergeant major looked at him inscrutably. ‘Is that why ye’re suddenly so generous with your supplies, and wanting nae a thing in return? Perhaps ye ken something about where those cartridges are going to go, and ye dinnae like it?’

‘I don’t know anything!’ The anger Cheng felt at the accusation was fuelled by guilt. ‘I just suspect things. Worry about them.’

Anderson kept a poker face. ‘Aye, well ye’re worrying me right enough as well. Maybe ye should have a chat, but to Captain Logan or the major.’

‘Logan wouldn’t understand.’

‘Probably not, knowing him. But if he brings it to the major’s attention, the major is more likely to be the one to grant ye your request to visit Master Wong.’

Cheng gritted his teeth, trying to refuse, or at least not accede to, Anderson’s demand. His fellow Chinese were too important to betray, but was betraying a betrayer really betraying his people? Wong would know, because he had the wisdom that Cheng knew he could never possess. Wong could make a decision like this. Wong, Cheng knew, in answer to this question, would say ‘Yes’.

All right,' he said at last.

The relaxed mood Anderson had bought for himself in the White Tigers' parlour had evaporated quickly, but he didn't mind. It was just one of those things that happened to a professional.

He wasn't sure that taking Cheng to the major was the right thing to do, but he knew that not doing it, and then discovering there was a split among the local rabble-rousers, would be a big mistake.

He took Cheng to the major's office, knocked and was admitted.

'This is Cheng. He's one of the Black Flag, the militia, and the owner of that poor excuse for a slop house where you were supposedly beaten up this week.'

Chesterton sat back and regarded the newcomer silently.

Cheng's jaw dropped. This was the man who had been attacked in the Hidden Panda right enough, but he had aged a dozen years since then.

'What can I do for you, Mr Cheng?' the major asked. 'Has Captain Logan perhaps been attacked today?'

'No, sir,' Cheng said stiffly.

Anderson could see in his eyes that he was already regretting starting this. He might start changing his story at any moment to get out of it. The sergeant major leant forward so that only Cheng could hear him. 'Don't be put off by the major. He really did get a bump on the head this week. He's probably sick of the ache by now.'

Cheng nodded, and continued. 'There's a man, he dresses like an abbot and used to be one. He's taking over the local chapters of the Black Flag, but what he's doing with them is nothing to do with the Black Flag's aims. I think he is the warlord behind the attacks on random towns and villages.'

'What makes you think that?'

'He told me, when he wanted me to follow him.'

'And what did you say?'

'I said "Yes, sir" because anyone who refuses him is killed. Then I packed my bags and wanted to leave.'

‘And?’

‘Jiang, who holds the same rank as myself in the Black Flag... I don’t think he lied when he promised obedience. He and this abbot talked for a lot longer. And then he challenged the man Wong-sifu had entrusted with looking after the surgery, almost as soon as Wong-sifu was in your hands.’

Once Cheng’s story was told, Chesterton sent him to the mess with Anderson to get something to eat. He didn’t know whether he could trust his story, or Jiang’s, or neither. The men were inscrutable Chinese, after all. To save face they’d tell you whatever you wanted to hear and think their lies were doing you a favour. Trusting any of them blindly was not an option.

Chesterton also thought that mistrusting Cheng’s information out of hand would be equally foolish. The Chinese had a long history of factional fighting, and there was no reason why there couldn’t be such a split in the Black Flag, or even in the semi-autonomous militias he was supposed to co-operate with. It was going to be a long night, but at least he would have something better to think about than his missing past.

He summoned Captain Logan, who came running from his quarters still buttoning his tunic. Chesterton quickly recounted Cheng’s story, and Logan considered it. ‘A rum sort of tale,’ he opined. ‘If there really is a schism in the Black Flag, and especially if a group has gone rogue, I think perhaps Mr Wong ought to be told. Kei-Ying, I mean.’

‘You do? Why?’

It wasn’t a challenge, but Chesterton was genuinely curious. Any thought might help him to make the right decision.

‘It could explain a lot. It certainly explains this chap Jiang’s accusation against Kei-Ying, if it was part of some sort of internal power struggle.’

‘So it was just a pack of lies.’ It wouldn’t surprise Chesterton if this were the case. What a tangled web we

weave, eh, Logan? All right. We'll see how our prisoner reacts to this.'

Ko was too tired to work. The figures on the paper vibrated and danced under his gaze, when they were in focus at all. If he was to calculate the answers the abbot wanted, he needed to be fresh. It would maybe be better to rest first and blaze through the work in the morning.

He couldn't sleep either. He lay on a thin blanket in one of the monks' bedchambers in a distant corner of the former monastery, and still saw the calculations dancing before his eyes, glowing slightly against the darkness of the ceiling. It was irritating, being caught between one state and the other. When he tried to work he wanted only to sleep, and vice versa. If someone could induce such a state in other men at will, he thought, it would make a fine torture for criminals.

Eventually, driven by the occasional restless twitch in his calves, he decided that perhaps working through a sequence of t'ai chi moves in the open air would help. He had trained to be a martial monk when he was a child, and found that such a pattern smoothed out the balance of his energy and helped him sleep afterwards.

He hadn't stuck with the training long because other interests had caught his attention, and he had found an aptitude for calculating the motions of the stars and planets. His father had apprenticed him to an astrologer, with the intent that this would prove more satisfying for the young Ko and more profitable for himself.

So far his father had been proved right, and Ko was one of the most respected men in the little town. Until this group of Black Flag troops had come. He wasn't sure how holding the town was supposed to hurt the Chings in the government, but politics had never been Ko's strong suit.

Ko knew there were guards who would try to stop him going outside the building, but he also knew, from his time training in the monastery, that there was a trap door through which he would be able to get up on to the roof, and then he could climb down a pillar to an exercise court.

First he had to go through the kitchen. A small serving hatch in a wall near his room led straight to this part of the building and, although he wasn't a teenager any more, at forty he was the youngest of the astrologers, and he had little difficulty in climbing through the hatch.

He padded through the deserted kitchen and up some steps, and reached what used to be a store room. He was not alone. One of the two aides to the abbot - the muscle-bound one - was sitting on a stool, alone in the dark.

To the astrologer's eyes, the monk would be asleep in a matter of moments. Ko held his breath, desperately hoping not to do anything that might disturb him and wake him up. He watched carefully, waiting for the moment when Zhao's attention was well and truly gone. Slowly, the monk's eyes became unfocused, his eyelids drooping slightly. They didn't close all the way. As Zhao's consciousness faded, Ko discerned the beginning of a faint sulphurous glow emanating from his dilated pupils.

In a few seconds Zhao's breathing was shallow and steady, and he was beginning to snore, but his eyes projected beams of light. Then he got up and walked to the centre of the room. Ko had never seen anything like it. He certainly never expected to see such a thing again.

The doors at the end of the room swung open, and Gao and the abbot entered. Both of them were projecting beams of fiery light from their eyes. They moved to the centre of the room and stood next to Zhao. The three monks were a few feet apart from each other, facing a spot in between them.

The beams of light met there, in the centre of the group, and instead of projecting on to the walls they stopped there and began to swirl. The light churned inwards, forming an amorphous cloud. The air began to taste strange, and there was a faint discordant sound. It was like a whimpered song, lamenting lost souls.

Ko watched in horror, and suddenly had one of those moments when a man realises that the silhouetted candlestick he is looking at is actually a pair of faces. He no longer saw light streaming from the trio's eyes - and their

mouths - to create a bizarre mass of light. Instead, he couldn't help but see tendrils of glowing fire from the hellish thing in the centre insinuating their way into the heads of the three monks.

Kei-Ying sniffed suspiciously at a mug of British army tea. It smelt ridiculously overdone and over sweetened. Calling it tea was, Kei-Ying thought, like calling a man-eating lion a cat.

He, Cheng, Anderson, Logan and Major Chesterton were sitting around a table in an otherwise deserted mess hall. The room was as large as Po Chi Lam's training hall, but was filled with simple tables and benches. A long counter separated it from the kitchen, but not from the smell of dull, stolid, flavourless food.

Kei-Ying took in the tale that Cheng had told. 'I think we should contact the other Tigers.'

'The Tigers?' Cheng grinned. 'Yes, they'll get you out of this barbarian hole in no time.'

The three British men glared at him.

'No offence,' he added.

Kei-Ying ignored him. 'If a Black Flag group has gone rogue under this warlord and started raiding and killing indiscriminately, it's going to come to the Tigers' attention anyway. In fact, it will almost certainly have done so already. If they're going to find themselves fighting against the Black Flag, they ought to know why.'

'The Ten Tigers of Kwantung?' Logan asked. He sounded impressed in a patronising sort of way.

'Eight Tigers,' Kei-Ying corrected him. 'Dr Leung Jon was murdered at dinner recently and my *sifu*, Luk Ah Choi, died a few years ago.'

'How would you propose to contact them?' Chesterton asked.

'I can write letters to them. Cheng can arrange for messengers to find them.' He looked questioningly at Chesterton. 'Does this mean I'm released?'

'Partly,' Chesterton said. 'I'd like to keep you here until we have more proof, but we won't lock your cell door and you can use our facilities to write your letters.'

Kei-Ying grimaced inwardly. He wouldn't be free in time to stop Jiang's duel with the Doctor, and he felt shame at having dropped the old man into such trouble.

'I suppose I have no choice.'

Ko started to back away, feeling backwards with his foot to find the steps. He wanted to look away from the bizarre sight in front of him, but daren't. It was fascinating in a horrible way - and he didn't want to risk one of the monks noticing him while his back was turned.

He started to put his foot down, but he hadn't judged the width of the step correctly. The foot caught briefly on the edge of the top step and slid off it on to the next one with a thud. The light in the room snapped off immediately.

Ko fled, but behind him he could hear footsteps in pursuit.

He dashed downstairs and through several empty rooms. At a side door he knocked over a dozing guard, totally by chance rather than with any martial skill. He knew he had to get as far away from here as he could. Not just away from the monastery, but away from the town.

He leapt off the edge of one terrace, then another. This was a fishing town, so there would be boats on the river. Breathless, his lungs burning as much as his thighs were, he pelted down several streets dodging the occasional guard. The sounds of footsteps behind him increased as more troops joined the chase. At one point a shot blew chips off a wall several feet away. It was a hopeless shot on the part of whichever guard had fired it, but it woke other troops up to the fact that something was happening.

Ko's legs felt heavier than mountains, his head swam and he fully expected his heart to burst. Instead, he heard wood booming hollowly under his feet and realised he had reached the jetty.

All the fishing boats were broken and shattered. He wanted to cry, but couldn't spare the breath. At the end of the jetty a

gangplank led up to the junk. It was too large a ship to operate on his own, even if he had known anything about sailing, but he could see a small rowing boat in a cradle on the deck. If he could get it into the water, maybe he could still escape with his life.

Then the deck swung up to meet him, smacking him across the face with the sickening crack that only solid planks can deliver. Ko rolled over, stunned. Above him, Zhao pulled back the leg with which he had tripped him and prepared to drive the edge of his foot down on to his neck.

Half-remembering his martial training at the monastery thirty years ago, Ko managed to grab Zhao's ankle and twist it. Zhao went down, and Ko knew he couldn't let the muscle-bound ape get back up again. He grabbed the man's neck in a lock and gripped more tightly, applying pressure to Zhao's windpipe. Gradually, the bigger man's struggles became more feeble. Ko shook with relief and strain as he felt consciousness leave the monk's muscles.

A faint patch of light brightened on the wall of the wheelhouse beyond them, as if someone was shining a torch on it. Two torches, in fact. Ko looked over his shoulder without letting go of Zhao, to see if there was someone with a candle or lantern. There was no-one there. The light was brighter now, and it looked almost as if it was being projected from Zhao's head.

Zhao went limp at last. But instead of flopping on to the deck his arm lashed back. Pain and blurring rippled out from the bridge of Ko's nose. Stunned, his grip weakened and Zhao tossed him aside.

To Ko's horror the light was coming from Zhao, beaming out of his eyes as it had back in the monastery. When the monk grinned, more light escaped through the gaps in his teeth and Ko realised that he'd made a huge error of judgement.

Then there was a flash of pure light and sound and Ko knew nothing else, ever again.

Sunrise brought morning exercise for Wong Fei-Hung and his students. Vicki watched from a cosy corner of the courtyard, trying her best to copy their movements. It was difficult, but something about doing this made her feel just a little stronger, a little healthier and a little better.

It never ceased to amaze her that people could do the most astonishing things, and achieve near miracles of balance and movement. She had seen people practise their *kata* in zero gravity, and beings with more than two arms or legs competing in judo tournaments broadcast on the ship-wide sports channel, but the ability of an ordinary human to do some of these things on Earth was magical to behold.

After a while Fei-Hung told the students to go and get breakfast, and approached Vicki. 'I saw you joining in. Not many Europeans would do that.'

'I'm not European,' she pointed out.

He looked surprised. 'Where are you from, then? America?'

'Earth,' Vicki said. 'To start with anyway.'

He looked at her as if he was trying to spot a flaw in her reply, and she realised what she had just said.

'The British Empire may be the most powerful in the world right now,' Fei-Hung said darkly, 'but that doesn't make it the whole of the Earth.'

'I didn't mean it that way.'

Vicki stopped talking, as the strangest sensation she had ever experienced buzzed inside her head. It wasn't so much *deja vu* as a sort of *jamais vu*, or even *roman vu*. Everything seemed unreal, and she half expected to see stagehands behind the walls, or the sun being taken off a wire that suspended it from the ceiling.

'Are you all right?' Fei-Hung asked, taking her arm. 'Let's go back into the surgery and brew a -'

'No.' Vicki shook her head and forced a smile, which she could feel was more goofy than intended. 'It's just the first time I've spoken to a fictional character.'

'Fictional?'

‘Oh, I don’t mean to be rude. It’s just that where I come from there are stories about you, and I didn’t think you were real until now.’

Fei-Hung looked down at himself and patted himself on the chest and stomach. ‘I feel real.’ He paused. ‘You did well this morning. No worse than any newcomer. Do you know *gungfu*?’

Vicki shook her head. She knew a few basics of self-defence, like aiming a kick at the groin if someone tried to grab her, but that was about the limit of her martial skills. Nobody had needed to know more than this in a world where fighting was done with the push of a button, if at all. ‘Only what I’ve seen you do - ,’ she bit off, ‘in movies’.

‘Ah. Our styles of boxing are family matters. There are basic moves and styles which are common to everyone, but the more advanced elements are handed down from father to son, or to selected students who are close friends and allies of the family.’ Feng-Hui laughed. ‘My father didn’t want me to learn *gungfu*! he admitted. ‘Think of it, one of the Ten Tigers, the greatest boxers of them all, and he didn’t want me to carry on this tradition.’

‘He seems all right with it now.’

‘I went to Luk Ah Choi, the master who taught my father, and learnt from him. When he found out why I had gone to him he immediately berated my father for not teaching me. The family style is supposed to be passed down from father to son, and Ah Choi warned my father that if he didn’t teach me it might be forgotten.’

‘It’s always the fun things parents don’t want you to do,’ Vicki said. ‘They’re happy for you study hard, but they panic if you want to stay out late the way they did when they were your age.’

‘Yes. That’s my father exactly!’

‘I think we have parental influence in common. Your father reminds me very much of mine.’

‘Was your father a healer too?’

Vicki shook her head. 'He had basic paramedic training for the job he was going to take up on Astra. And it was useful on the ship.'

'A ship?'

Vicki only nodded, the laughter fading from her heart.

'He was in the navy, then?' Fei-Hung asked.

'Oh no, it was a civilian ship. Passengers and some cargo.'

'Is this ship here in Guangzhou?'

'No, it... ran aground, a few months ago.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'There were only two survivors. Myself and one man. I found out, when he died, that he had caused the accident deliberately. He killed my father. But it was already too late to find out whether I'd have the courage to take revenge, or the courage not to. I don't think I'd have liked myself much either way, so I'm glad I didn't have to choose.'

Smoke and steam rose from long, low buildings set among the riverside trees. The abbot, flanked by two men from his quartermaster's staff, stepped into the nearest one. Inside, sweating men and women were grinding black, steel tubes and fitting them against wooden stocks. Once the breeches and locks were added they would be rifles.

The abbot paused for a moment, watching them work. Then he took a barrel from the nearest woman and examined it closely, inside and out.

'Acceptable,' he said, handing it back.

One of the quartermasters made a note.

The abbot moved along the production line and took a barrel from a man who had been working hard on it with a file. Examining it, the abbot could see that the end of the barrel had been filed at a slight angle. Once evened up it would be a fraction short when it was mated with a breech and stock.

He lashed out with the barrel, the steel smashing into the man's cheek. The worker sprawled, bleeding and spitting teeth.

'Replace this turd,' the abbot said.

The quartermaster made another note.

Fei-Hung found the Doctor in the surgery studying one of his father's medical texts.

'Most interesting,' the Doctor said. 'Most interesting for this time period.'

Fei-Hung smiled, proud of his father and naturally glad to hear him praised. It lasted only an instant as he had brought more serious news. 'Jiang is at the gates.'

The Doctor frowned as if unsure what the message meant. Then his face cleared. 'Oh, this ridiculous and silly duel. I'm rather afraid I had quite forgotten it.' He sighed wearily. 'Very well, let's get on with it, shall we? Let him in.'

'*Sif*- Doctor,' Fei-Hung corrected himself. 'You cannot mean to fight Jiang-sifu.'

'Can't I indeed? And who are you to tell me what I mean?'

Fei-Hung had never seen such courage in a white man before. Or maybe it was stubbornness. 'Do you not know who he is?'

'A rival master to your father. Does it really matter?'

'Two years ago a Japanese master came to challenge Jiang. The Japanese had heard of his boasts about being a great fighter, and wanted to teach him a lesson. Everyone expected it to be a prodigious bout that would drag on and on.'

'And wasn't it?'

'It took exactly one move. Jiang killed the Japanese master with a single kick to the head.'

All the students were waiting, ranged around the main courtyard. They were whispering among themselves, but Jiang couldn't hear them clearly enough to make out what they were saying. Perhaps some of them were expressing dismay that one of their own would challenge the man appointed by the master of the school, but this didn't bother Jiang. He was sure the majority were excited at the prospect of seeing him humiliate the *gwailo*.

Once the Doctor was no longer in charge Jiang, as deputy, would take his place. Then he need only ensure that Kei-Ying didn't return.

As if summoned by Jiang thinking about his father, Fei-Hung appeared through the latticework doors of the hall. Chesterton, Barbara and Vicki followed. Finally, the Doctor appeared. He hadn't even bothered to change into more appropriate clothing, Jiang noted.

The Doctor's clothes weren't loose enough to perform much in the way of martial arts, so perhaps he was going to forfeit. That wouldn't be as much fun, but it would still get Jiang what he wanted, so he would accept it.

The Doctor stepped down on to the courtyard and approached Jiang. He stopped a few feet away. 'Well, young man,' he said. 'Do you still insist on this ridiculous duel?'

'Unless you are choosing to forfeit. There is no dishonour in acknowledging one's limitations.' Jiang waited for the Doctor's inevitable backing down.

'So be it,' the Doctor said. 'Then let's get on with it.' He turned slightly side on, left foot forward, lowering his right hand behind him.

With his left hand, the Doctor beckoned to Jiang.

CHAPTER FOUR

Drunken Master

1

The sun had reached its zenith, and the Doctor and Jiang faced each other in the middle of Po Chi Lam's courtyard. Ian, Barbara, Vicki and Fei-Hung were standing on the raised veranda, while the other staff and students in their plain tunics lined the walls on either side. Everyone was giving the combatants plenty of room.

The Doctor, in his shirtsleeves and braces, was beckoning to the lanky Jiang. Ian steeled himself to jump in and take on Jiang himself. Without looking round Fei-Hung reached back to put a hand on his shoulder.

'That will only get you beaten,' Fei-Hung murmured. 'And the Doctor as well.'

'You know he can't win.'

'I know only that the Doctor is older, and I believe he cannot win. But I cannot know what will happen before it happens. Even the strongest warrior might be beaten by the weakest, if fortune so decides.'

Ian's eyes momentarily flicked round to Fei-Hung. 'That sounds like a very wise attitude.'

'It should be. It's my father's. He drums it into all his students in the hope of preventing us from becoming arrogant and overconfident.'

'It doesn't seem to have made much of an impression on Jiang.'

Barbara could barely look. She had already seen Ian beaten almost to a pulp, and had no wish to see the same thing

happen to the only person who could take them away from here.

Part of her mind told her the Doctor must have some plan, or that maybe he really did have the ability to match Jiang. The old boy could be pretty sprightly when he wanted to, though she knew he always paid for it later. The larger part of her mind, however, simply went along with what her eyes were seeing, as did most people's.

She could see an old man who walked with a stick preparing to fight a younger, fitter man who had been training all his adult life, and who had once killed a man with a single kick. She couldn't understand why the Doctor was going through with this. She had visited Nero's Rome and there she had watched Ian fight in the Coliseum as a gladiator, under threat of death. There was no such threat here from any authority, so why do it?

If it were two teenage boys fighting in the Coal Hill School playground she would almost understand. Boys of such an age seemed to have a genetic disposition to proving themselves. The Doctor was a far cry from being a teenage boy, and generally disapproved of violence.

She bit her tongue to avoid shouting to them to stop this nonsense, just as she would have done at the school back in Shoreditch. She had heard Fei-Hung's warning to Ian and didn't want to make the situation any worse. Despite this, she remembered her desire to hit someone when she was tending to the unconscious Ian the previous day. If Jiang brought the Doctor down perhaps she would just give in to that impulse, and see for once what it felt like.

Vicki watched the two men on the courtyard intently. She would have preferred to watch Fei-Hung knock seven bells out of this Jiang person, and find out whether he was as good as the stories and legends suggested.

She didn't mind watching the Doctor fight. For one thing, as Fei-Hung had said, many masters were as old as the Doctor - or perhaps that should be as young as the Doctor appeared to be. She knew he was really much older, though

she didn't know by how much. If forced to guess, she would probably say she thought he must be five hundred years old.

She didn't think he was frail, even though he was a demi-millenarian. Over the centuries he must have learnt lots of different things about looking after himself. She had been with him when he had fought off an assassin in Nero's palace in Rome. Even though the man had been younger and stronger-looking than Jiang, and had been armed with a sword, the Doctor had fought him off with little apparent effort.

For this reason, and because of his intelligence, she was sure he would beat Jiang. She hoped she was sure.

Jiang knew he could bring the Doctor down with a good kick to the head, but he doubted that the watching students would see much honour in doing that to the old man. He wanted them to cheer him and accept him as their master, not vilify him. So instead, he started with a punch.

The Doctor didn't even try to dodge it, and Jiang doubted that he could. At the instant before his fist would connect with the Doctor's face, the old man started to lean back and his left hand began to rise. It was too late, in Jiang's opinion.

Then the Doctor's forearm connected with his own, his hand snaking up and around Jiang's arm. It first went outwards over Jiang's bicep, then ducked under his armpit, and suddenly the Doctor's left palm was on Jiang's chest next to the shoulder. Jiang never even noticed the Doctor's foot dart out and catch his ankle, because suddenly he was on the ground with blinding agony shooting up his spine from his tailbone.

As one, the students and staff gasped. Then, slowly, they began to cheer. Fei-Hung could hardly believe his eyes. The Doctor had scarcely so much as moved, and Jiang, one of the best fighters Fei-Hung had seen, was down. Perhaps they did have masters in the west, and the Doctor was one. In any case, his father must have been right after all, to entrust the school into this man's care.

Ian regretted ever having doubted the Doctor. He should have known the wily old bird would know how to deal with a situation like this.

Barbara felt her heart shoot up into her throat when Jiang moved, but then it was floating with elation rather than jumping in alarm.

Vicki gritted her teeth to avoid letting out a laugh. That would probably have been inappropriate, she thought. The Doctor hadn't let her down, as she had known he wouldn't.

Jiang bit down on the yell that wanted to burst from his lips. The pain geysering up from his tailbone was scalding and freezing at the same time.

The Doctor looked down at him, an infuriating twinkle in his eye. 'I hope you aren't hurt too much.' He reached out a hand. 'Do you need any help?'

Jiang swatted the hand away, and rose. He hoped his legs didn't look as wobbly as they felt. The old bastard had tricked him this time, but he was determined it wouldn't happen again. 'You couldn't hurt me if you tried.'

'I wouldn't want to, dear boy,' the Doctor said. 'But this duelling is very dangerous - you might easily hurt yourself.'

'You worry about yourself, Doctor,' Jiang spat. 'You were fortunate, and that will save you face.' He lowered his voice to a threatening mutter. 'Be thankful that you will not be seen as humiliated. You will die with honour.'

The Doctor's expression was mild, understanding and downright irritating. 'Yes, I suppose I shall. You know, there are laws against giving details of future events to people, hmm?'

Jiang had no idea what the Doctor was talking about, but was sure it was a deliberate attempt to confuse him and break his concentration. He refused to let this happen. 'Again,' he said, and lunged at the Doctor, careful to keep his weight moving forward.

This time the Doctor moved a little more. He caught the wrist behind Jiang's incoming fist and pulled it towards himself. At the same time, he turned on his heel and slapped Jiang lightly on the back.

Jiang hit the earth face-first this time. The watching students applauded.

Jiang sprang to his feet, brushing dirt and pebbles from his face. 'Fight properly, damn you.'

'And what exactly do you mean by "properly"? Hmm?' The Doctor's tone was definitely slightly mocking now. 'Like you do, I suppose? Well, that type of thing isn't doing you much good here, is it?'

Jiang grimaced, his face burning. The old bastard wasn't even putting in any effort! It was as if he was dismissing Jiang's very thoughts and instincts, rather than besting him in a proper fight. He decided it was time to forget his magnanimous plans to allow the Doctor an honourable fight.

He came forward again and lashed out with a foot. It was the type of roundhouse kick that he practised by shattering clay jars of water, and skulls shattered more easily than the jars did.

This time the Doctor simply dodged back, not trying to stop the kick. This didn't surprise Jiang too much, as he was certain there was nothing the Doctor could possibly stop the kick with. Even if he blocked it his arm would be broken in the process.

Jiang's foot missed the Doctor's head by inches, and he continued into a spinning back kick. The Doctor kept retreating towards the steps that led up to the veranda. Then he stopped and took up a guarding stance. Jiang felt himself filled with anticipation, and it was like the warmth of a good wine.

He came forward, starting to kick. There was a sudden flash in his eyes - the sun reflecting from the Doctor's ring - but it came too late to stop him aiming the kick right at the Doctor's head.

The top of Jiang's foot stopped moving when it impacted, and crushing pain exploded up his leg blasting him to the

ground. He writhed in agony, trying to reach his foot with his hands. He could feel the gut-churning sensation of ligaments and muscles tearing. Every movement sent a sympathetic ripple through his bowels.

The Doctor was looking at him, his head tilted to one side. Behind him a solid, hardwood beam, one of many that supported the veranda's roof, had a bloody mark, and splinters gouged out of it. The Doctor, Jiang realised, had simply positioned himself in front of it and moved his head to let Jiang's foot hit the wood. The flash from his ring had covered the movement.

Jiang tried to rise, but his foot just wouldn't support him.

'I think this duel is over, don't you?' the Doctor asked.

All Jiang could do was curse and nod through the pain.

2

Ian could hardly find the words to express himself. 'Doctor, that was astonishing!'

Everyone was trying to clap the Doctor on the back, and his fellow time travellers could hardly get near him.

'Well, it wouldn't have been if I had listened to you, young man,' the Doctor rebuked him. 'I told you, dear boy. Brains will always win over brawn. Have you heard of Miyamoto Musashi?'

Ian shook his head.

'I have,' Fei-Hung said. 'He was a Japanese warrior, generations ago.'

The Doctor gave a pleased nod. 'That is correct, young man. Musashi once told the story of a situation similar to our own. A farmer came to him to ask his advice about a duel he was to fight. A samurai warrior, who was feared all over the area as an unbeatable fighter, had challenged him over some imaginary insult or other. The farmer was not a warrior and, although he owned a sword, he had never fought with it.

'Musashi told him, "First, accept that you will die tomorrow."'

'Cheerful advice,' Ian said dryly.

‘Oh, hush now, Chesterton. He then told the farmer to hold his sword high above his head and, when the samurai stepped forward to strike, to bring the sword down on the top of his head...,’ the Doctor demonstrated, chopping his hand down almost unconsciously, ‘...just like so!’

‘What happened?’ Fei-Hung asked.

‘On the morning of the duel the farmer waited. When he saw the samurai approaching he held his sword over his head as Musashi had told him. The samurai tried to judge the best way to cut him down. It would be easy - the farmer was no fighter and the samurai could kill him with one blow. But to do this he would have to come in under the farmer’s sword, and he knew he would get his head chopped in half if he did.’

Fei-Hung nodded, understanding. ‘You mean he knew he could kill the farmer, but only at the price of his own life?’

‘Yes, exactly! And after spending an hour trying to work out how he could kill the farmer without dying himself he put his sword away and gave up in disgust and went home!’

The Doctor chuckled, but there was something knowing and calculating about the chuckle. ‘Brains over brawn, you see. Brains over brawn.’ He paused and looked narrowly at Ian. ‘You know, I think I find it quite disappointing that you have such lack of faith.’ He harrumphed.

‘Yes, I understand that, but I was thinking about his youth and speed rather than his brawn.’

‘And so was he, and that’s what cost him the bout,’ the Doctor chuckled. ‘He was more concerned with doing the thing quickly, than with doing it right.’

He stepped aside to let a couple of students carry Jiang into the surgery. The defeated man’s eyes were screwed tight shut, his teeth were audibly grinding together. The Doctor stopped the students and examined Jiang’s shattered foot. He rattled off a list of words that Ian couldn’t quite catch, and the lead student nodded.

‘People like the young man I’ve been fighting tend to think that sophistication is at the heart of power,’ the Doctor said. ‘That the most complicated and flashy movements are the

best, and that doing them makes them more effective. But that isn't true. Simplicity is at the heart of power.'

'Simplicity?' Ian asked.

'Why yes, of course. The more complicated and theatrical a move, the longer it takes to perform. It also requires more concentration, and so is easier to throw off.'

'Well, anyway, you beat him. That's what matters.'

The Doctor chuckled. 'I suppose I should be proud to take the credit, but really he beat himself.'

'He beat himself? You fought him, you won. It was because you were smarter, but you still beat him.'

The Doctor shook his head, and smiled in a kindly way. 'That young man there beat himself because he expected me to fight back with the same kind of movements as he was using. He acted as he would act against someone who would punch and kick him back, and so wasn't prepared for my simply acting as a fulcrum, and letting him be a lever.' He sighed. 'I suppose I shall now have to waste time treating him, after he's caused all this bother.'

The abbot lay at peace, basking in the soft warmth of the girls who shared his bed. There were three, though the bed was large enough for at least twice that number. They were pretty enough, but they didn't stir his loins and he found that this didn't trouble him at all. When a woman stole a man's seed, she stole part of his vital energy, his *chi*. In many ways the woman was death, if the man was not careful.

The room was formerly a set of reception rooms for the monastery's previous abbot. Like so many other people, he would not be complaining about the situation any more.

'My Lord.' Gao's voice came through the door. It carried quietly but clearly. 'The two remaining astrologers have completed their calculations.'

The abbot slid off the bed and pulled on a robe patterned with lions. His eyes blazed and his voice changed. It emanated from somewhere deep in the hearts of all three monks: the abbot, Gao and, outside, Zhao.

'The stars are right.'

Kei-Ying handed the final letter to Cheng. Logan thought the Chinese doctor looked ten years older than he had yesterday, after sitting up writing through the night. He couldn't see himself doing that. It was one of the reasons he had joined the army: to get away from the family accountancy business.

'That one's for Beggar Soh,' Kei-Ying said.

'Yes, *sifu*,' Cheng said quietly.

He slipped out.

Logan went to tell Major Chesterton the news. Chesterton was asleep, another victim of the long night. He hadn't undressed further than taking off his boots and tunic, and Logan was relieved to see that - in sleep, at least - he was looking less troubled and haggard. As far as he was concerned, a man like Chesterton didn't deserve such trouble. That was the way of the world as far as he could see - the devil looked after his own, and those who were good merely suffered for it.

He touched Chesterton's cheek with the back of his first two fingers for a second, then gently shook him awake. 'Sir,' he said.

'Wha...?'

'The letters are on their way.'

'What le...' Chesterton shook himself. 'Oh, those letters. Right.' He pulled his boots on and retrieved his tunic, then headed back to Kei-Ying's cell, with Logan following.

Kei-Ying was lying on the cot when they reached the cell. He yawned. 'I'm sorry, gentlemen, but even a Tiger must rest from time to time.'

'That's all right,' Chesterton said. 'I just wanted to ask if you have any other suggestions.'

'If the Doctor is still alive,' Kei-Ying said through another yawn, 'he should be able to help. He is a very intelligent and civilised man, for a *gwailo*.'

Logan remembered seeing this doctor the previous day. He didn't know quite what to make of him, but he seemed to have done Chesterton some good and that won him points as far as Logan was concerned.

‘All right,’ Chesterton was saying. ‘But on the condition that you tell the truth about the English people at Po Chi Lam.’

‘They are my guests, willingly. The Doctor is currently running my surgery. Unless he lost this morning’s duel...’

‘And the beaten man?’

‘Some drunken dock workers at the Hidden Panda did that. I treated him.’

‘Who is he?’

Kei-Ying finally opened his eyes, sat up and looked Chesterton in the eye. ‘As I am given to understand it... he is you.’

The children had gone and Ian was fetching Barbara some afternoon tea. It was his first day of teaching in two years, and it felt good. He had almost forgotten what it was like, and why he’d chosen teaching as a career.

An adult student had demonstrated the moves the schedule required the children to do, and Barbara kept them in line. Ian had found himself explaining the workings of fulcrums and leverage, to explain why certain moves worked the way they did. This aspect of martial arts was something that hadn’t occurred to him before, and he wondered if he should take it up if - when - he ever got back to London. He knew of an evening class in judo quite near to his place.

When he got back with the tea, he found that the Doctor had joined Barbara. ‘That Jiang’s foot isn’t broken,’ he was saying. ‘Just very badly bruised. He’s really quite lucky.’

‘Well,’ Barbara said with visible reluctance, ‘I suppose it’s for the best that no-one got really hurt.’

‘Yes, I suppose it is.’

The Doctor turned to Ian. ‘Since we are already in China I didn’t think Barbara and I would have to wait for you to go to China for the tea.’

‘It’s been a busy day, Doctor, as I’m sure you understand. One minute those kids are just running around chaotically, but the next minute they’re focused and everybody’s kung-fu fighting.’

'Those kids are as fast as lightning,' Barbara added.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. 'Are they indeed? And was it, perchance, dear boy, a little bit frightening? Hmm?'

'I wouldn't like to try to control a playground full of them,' Ian admitted. 'But I don't think the word -'

A distant thud and a cry of pain silenced him. It had come from the far end of the west wing. Ian was on his feet at once, and ran to see what had happened. Jiang was hauling himself through a window, and not quite managing to stifle his cries as he moved his swollen foot. Ian sprinted through the hall towards him, arms outstretched to grab Jiang and pull him back in.

He was just too late. He saw Jiang limping towards the corner of the grounds where the wall was lowest and tried to squeeze through a window, but it was just a little too narrow and he couldn't get through. He dropped back as the Doctor and Barbara entered the room.

'It's Jiang,' he said. 'He's gone through the window and is trying to get over the wall. I think I might just be able to catch him.'

He started to leave, but the Doctor put a hand in his way. 'Oh, let the infuriating man go. After that defeat and loss of face, he won't be back.'

'I hope you're right, Doctor,' Ian said. As far as he could tell, this Jiang was the vindictive sort. He was sure they hadn't seen the last of him. 'I really hope you're right.'

3

Music was in the air in the monastery. A small number of nervous musicians were grouped where there had once been incense burners, playing for the abbot. Gao found his lord standing at the mirror behind the dais. His fingertips were on the glass, as if he were trying to gauge what it felt like or find something that was lost.

'My Lord,' Gao whispered respectfully, and bent on one knee, fist in palm.

‘Gao.’ The abbot didn’t turn from the mirror, nor did his expression change from one of awed puzzlement.

‘Jiang-sifu has returned.’

The abbot’s voice was soft. ‘Then the time traveller is dead.’

‘No, my Lord.’ Gao knew his master would be angry and disappointed. He knew this because he felt the same way himself, and knew Zhao would too. Zhao would almost certainly be feeling these emotions more strongly than he was; he always had done, even when they were boys.

‘No?’ The abbot turned at last, his eyes glittering with a growing anger. ‘Jiang lost the duel?’

‘Yes, my Lord. He did not give up his life as he should have, but allowed himself to be merely injured, and humiliated. By his own admission, the Doctor treated the injury Jiang received.’ Gao could barely keep the shudder out of his voice. He knew his lord would feel it anyway, such was the bond they now shared.

The abbot was silent for a long time. Finally he said, ‘Do you remember what I looked like, Gao?’

‘My Lord?’ Gao had no idea what this had to do with Jiang’s return. He was even more astonished by the fact that his master could surprise him in spite of their bond. Then again, perhaps this was why he and his brother were loyal servants of their lord, and not the other way round.

‘I do not,’ the abbot said. ‘I remember my name and my desires. I remember that which I ruled, and how to make decisions and make war. But I do not remember my face. Nor yours, though I know who you are.’

Gao thought for a moment. ‘No, my Lord,’ he said. ‘I do not remember your face, or mine, or my brother’s... Does it matter?’

‘No. But I am curious as to why we do not remember these things.’ He fell silent again, then: ‘Bring Jiang before me.’

Gao bowed and backed out of the room.

The ferryman had brought Jiang to the small town where the junk was now moored. Gao had been waiting for him on the jetty with an armed escort of armoured warriors. Jiang

vaguely remembered passing through the town a few times before.

He had tried to hide the fact that he was limping from Gao, and the pain from himself, but Gao had known immediately that he had been injured. By the time they reached the monastery Jiang had told him the whole story. He didn't want to, but he knew he couldn't hide his swollen foot for long.

Gao had gone into the monastery first leaving Jiang with the guards. He hadn't given the guards any orders, but Jiang suspected that he and they both knew they were there to keep him where he was. He shivered.

After a few minutes Gao had returned and led him into the monastery, and along dark, unlit corridors to the large hall where the monks used to pray to their now-gone Buddha statue.

The abbot was sitting on a throne on the dais that had supported the Buddha. His face was as calm and impassive as that of any of the four life-sized statues that were the hall's only current decoration. Pale, sweating musicians twanged strings and tapped drums in a discordant excuse for barbaric music, the likes of which Jiang had never heard before.

'You know who I am, Jiang. Do you know what I looked like?' the abbot asked.

The question took Jiang by surprise. 'Like a living god, my Lord,' he said promptly. 'Athletic, powerful, handsome. As the emperor of all China should be.'

The abbot's expression didn't change, but his tone did. Jiang felt a stab at his heart. It wasn't fear or horror, but the certainty that he was doomed.

'I do not remember my face, but I do know how to tell when someone is telling me what they think I want to hear, instead of the truth that I asked for.' The abbot stepped down from the dais and paced around Jiang, who didn't dare move.

'Do you lie to me often?' he asked conversationally.

'My Lord?'

The abbot paused and looked at Jiang with intolerable calm. 'I'm sorry, I didn't think such a simple question would confuse an intelligent man so. Are you in the habit of lying to me, Jiang?'

'No, my Lord!'

'How can I believe that? How can I believe you?'

'My Lord, I am your faithful servant, pledged to serve and please you -'

'Yet you lie to me when I ask you what I looked like .You lied to me when you said you would kill the traveller.'

'My Lord, I had truth in my heart

'You had cowardice in your heart!' the abbot roared in Jiang's ear.

Jiang almost stumbled at the shout.

'Cowardice and incompetence!' the abbot spat. 'Do you serve me by sparing my enemies? Do you please me by trying to make a fool of me with your words? Your only pledge is to keeping your own head on your shoulders. You say whatever it will take to deflect the anger you fear from me.'

'My Lord -'

'More accurately,' the abbot continued, as he stopped in front of Jiang, you tried to do what you thought would make me not kill you. But, you are as incompetent in that as you are in doing my bidding.'

Jiang recoiled as the abbot's eyes began to glow with a fiery light that beamed from his eyes as if they were lanterns. The abbot's lips parted and the same glow was released from between them.

A hard wall pressed against Jiang's back, and he realised with a shudder of terror that he couldn't get any further away from the demonic figure that approached him.

'You are weak,' a voice said, though the abbot's lips didn't blot out the light and Jiang wasn't even sure it was the abbot's voice. It echoed, and seemed to come from everywhere. 'Weak. Coward. You are not fit to be a Han.'

Jiang sidled along the wall, reaching out with his hand to feel the corner that led into the corridor. His fingers curled around the edge and he knew he could make a run for it.

The abbot, still a few feet away, raised an empty hand, his palm towards Jiang. 'You must be punished for the treachery of incompetence.'

Jiang grabbed the corner and pulled himself round it, the pull giving him a bit of extra speed as he started to run. The abbot was older and overweight; no match for Jiang's sprinting.

The abbot didn't move. He merely smiled.

With an explosive report of displaced air, a lightning flash connected his palm with Jiang's back.

Jiang's shirt caught fire even as he was blasted headlong through the door. He crashed to the ground and the skin across his shoulder blades blackened and cracked, flames from his burning shirt climbing up his queue towards his scalp. A couple of nearby men, who were scrubbing the floor, snatched up their buckets of soapy water and ran to douse him. Soaked, he remained face down, only the moan of a deeply damaged animal escaping his lips.

Pain drowned out his senses, blotting out the abbot's approach until he stood over Jiang's head. The abbot's hand stretched out again and Jiang's heart raced. Terror of the pain, and of oblivion, washed through him. The former was stronger, and the only thought he could muster was that if death would end the pain it would be welcome.

The abbot winced, an eyelid fluttering. His hand stiffened into a claw, then curled into a shaking fist. As it did darkness returned to his eyes. 'Leave him to the fates,' he told the men around him. Then he turned on his heel and was gone.

Jiang writhed alone in a pain that was more exquisite than he had ever imagined could possibly exist - but, mercifully, not for long.

There was a lot of hugging and thanking and feasting and drinking that night. It was the night Kei-Ying returned to Po Chi Lam and was reunited with Fei-Hung. Fei-Hung and Cheng had immediately arranged what, for want of a better word, Ian would call a party.

Though there was much to celebrate, Kei-Ying and Cheng also wanted to get down to business. Kei-Ying managed to corner the Doctor and his companions at last, and drew them aside to talk with Cheng. He quickly outlined the fears he and Cheng, and Chesterton and Logan had about the Black Flag and Jiang, and Cheng told them about the abbot.

He was telling his story for what felt like the third or fourth time in a day. It felt good, getting it off his chest, and he was beginning to enjoy the catharsis, though he suspected this would wear off when he sobered up.

‘The last raid I did, when I was a bandit, was against a caravan to Sui Lim. Myself and nine others - you’ve met Pang, he was one of them.’ The Doctor nodded as Cheng continued. ‘We stole money, jewels, religious trinkets and then there was a storm, so we took shelter in a cave. Three Shaolin monks - martial monks - caught up with us there. They beat the crap out of all of us.’

‘And, young man?’

‘And... then something strange happened. I can’t explain it.’

‘Try.’

‘Whatever it was happened to the three monks. There was this light, inside the cave, and it distracted them from tying us up. Then...’ Cheng shivered at the memory. ‘Then their eyes glowed. I don’t mean like a cat’s do, but like a powerful lantern does. I’ve never seen anything so unnatural, and I never want to again.’

‘Then?’

‘Then we escaped, left them there and hoped never to see them again. And I didn’t. Until now. They’re the three new Black Flag people. At least they claim to be. This abbot is almost certainly the one who wanted Jiang to kill you - luckily he overestimated Jiang’s brains, which is easy enough.’

‘I see. And you say he also has other plans?’

‘He has this obsession with getting hold of astrologers and astronomers, and killing off anyone else who is a scientist or teacher.’ Cheng glanced at Kei-Ying. ‘That explains a lot.’

Barbara had been listening to Cheng's tale, and was becoming more worried as it went on. She gnawed on a knuckle, then realised what she was doing and looked at her hand as if she'd never seen it before.

'I wonder...' the Doctor said. He wasn't looking at anyone in particular, so Barbara assumed he was thinking out loud.

'I have a feeling...'

"By the pricking of my thumbs," Barbara quoted, "something wicked this way comes."

'Yes, my dear! Exactly. There was something about the feel of the TARDIS's landing...'

'It felt pretty normal to me,' Ian said.

'But you're not connected to the Ship the way Susan and I - the way I am. The tiny vibration of the controls under my fingers...' The Doctor pointed to Barbara. 'And then your experience, so close to where the Ship landed. And now Mr Cheng's tale. These things all form a pattern,' he opined darkly, 'and I wonder about it, and how it fits in.'

'Fits in with what?'

'With human history, Chessington!' He shook his head and stomped off, muttering to himself.

'Chinese his- Chinese politics,' Barbara corrected herself, isn't really my speciality, but surely someone like this abbot would have been a globally known figure. But I can't think of anyone who fits his description. Certainly not from the 1860s.'

'There are many warlords in China,' Kei-Ying told her. 'Being head of an army is almost normal for some people.'

The Doctor returned, studying a small fruit. 'Mr Cheng?'

'Yes?'

'Might I ask what sort of night it was when you first met this, er - abbot?'

'It was the seventh full moon, just as it is now. There was a storm for part of the night, but it was finished by the time we came out of the cave.'

'I thought as much. Master Wong, do you know anywhere I might be able to get hold of a telescope?'

Kei-Ying nodded, wearing a puzzled frown. 'Of what size?'

‘The largest possible. And I shall also require a place from which to observe with it. Somewhere as high up as possible.’

‘The tower,’ Vicki suggested. ‘It was at least four or five storeys high. It should be an ideal observation platform.’

‘That’s Zhenhailou,’ Kei-Ying said, in an aside from pondering the Doctor’s request for a telescope. ‘The British use it as a watchtower.’

‘A capital suggestion. A telescope in Zhenhailou. ‘The Doctor snapped his fingers and looked pleased with himself. ‘If, that is, the captain or the major can be persuaded to let us borrow the tower.’

‘I think Major Chesterton and I have an understanding for the moment,’ Kei-Ying said. ‘In fact, that would solve both your problems as the British have a large telescope there, built by their navy.’

‘Excellent. Then there’s no time to waste.’ The Doctor lifted a panama hat from a hat stand near the door.

‘I shall go at once.’

Kei-Ying followed the Doctor out to the gate. ‘Do you want me to come with you?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘That’s very kind of you, Master Wong, but I think I’m right in thinking that you’ve seen enough of Xamian for just now, hmm?’

Kei-Ying couldn’t deny it. In fact, he’d be perfectly happy if the island and its fortress sank into the river and were never seen again. At the same time, it was his country, his city, his friends, and he wanted to do his best for them all.

‘Perhaps Ian -’

‘No!’ The Doctor looked as if someone had suggested he drink poison. ‘The two Chestertons must not meet. Not ever, do you understand me?’

Kei-Ying stepped back under the force of the Doctor’s insistence. ‘I understand, but... why?’

I cannot explain in a way you would understand, Master Wong. Suffice it to say that their meeting would be dangerous beyond your imagination. For both of them, and for this city.’

Zhenhailou wasn't anything like as large as Xamian. Sitting atop a low hill overlooking the city, it was a five-storey tower manned by a platoon of soldiers and defended by a couple of cannon.

The wall around the grounds was no higher than the one around Po Chi Lam, and Sergeant Major Anderson thought it was probably more for show than to keep out any invading hordes. He was at the gate to the small compound, explaining the new visitors to the sergeant in charge. 'The major has decided tae give these civilians the run o' the place, but dinnae harass them too much; they're actually doing us some good.'

'Even the Chinks?'

Anderson shrugged. 'You never know.'

The sergeant, a gruff, balding Yorkshireman, looked suspiciously at the newcomers. The Doctor was staring at the stars with an expression of barely controlled impatience. Ian and Fei-Hung were carrying a tripod between them, and the giant Pang was effortlessly supporting a large, long crate on his shoulder.

'What the hell are they supposed to be doing?'

'Looking through a telescope. A big one, borrowed from the navy, in that crate.'

The sergeant's mouth crooked up at one end. 'You could see the back rooms of the White Tigers from here with one of them things.'

'That's as may be,' Anderson snapped, making a mental note always to close the curtains on future visits there, 'but this lot are looking at the stars and the moon. Chesterton seems to think -'

'Yes, and what's he doing here?' The sergeant indicated Ian. 'And why has he shaved off -'

'He hasnae.' Anderson waited for the inevitable question and the chance to see the sergeant's mind implode.

'But he hasn't got it now.'

'There are two of them,' Anderson said pleasantly.

The sergeant's face was a joy to behold.

'But... how... ?'

'I dinnae ken,' Anderson admitted. 'The Doctor there has some sort of explanation, but it sounded double Dutch to me. I reckon they're twins.'

'I suppose...'

'Anyway,' Anderson warned, 'this one has no rank. Ye're not to salute him.'

'Right.'

'Apart from that, give them every assistance the Doctor asks for.' He turned to go, then hesitated. 'But keep an eye on the Chinees, just in case.'

'Too bloody right.'

Anderson went back to the civilians as the gate opened behind him. 'Right lads, ye're on your own now. I'll tell the major that ye're getting started.'

Inside the compound oil lamps gave the already warm night a friendlier touch of light. A couple of men in their shirtsleeves were performing some sort of maintenance duties on a cannon. The tower itself was five storeys high, but there were only three floors.

The ground floor had been turned into a combined living, eating and working area for the soldiers on duty. The ceiling was so high that the lamps on the walls left the upper reaches in shadow. An urn of tea so sweet and thick that Ian thought he could have spread it on toast was simmering away in one corner. Boxes of tools and bullets were scattered around. Several smaller rooms split off from the main area to give the man in charge privacy, and to separate the small kitchen from the rest of the space.

The next floor up, actually in the middle of the tower, was partitioned into untidy sleeping quarters and exuded the rank smell of sweaty clothes and unwashed bedding.

Finally, sections of the tiled roof had been removed, giving anyone on the top floor a clear view in every direction.

'Yes,' the Doctor said, 'this will be ideal. Ideal, my boy.'

'Thank heavens for that,' Ian grunted as he and Fei-Hung set the tripod down. He wanted to yell with relief. He spread the legs of the tripod, then attached the telescope, which Pang lifted from its crate and held in place until all the screws and bolts were tightened.

'Capital, my boy. Boys,' the Doctor corrected himself.

He immediately set about lining up the telescope on the first of his chosen targets. 'Mars first, I think,' he said to Ian.

'Easier to find.'

'Precisely.' The Doctor adjusted the brass knobs of the telescope.

Fei-Hung cleared his throat and said, 'I should be getting back to Po Chi Lam.'

'Very well, but be careful. City streets can be dangerous at night.'

Fei-Hung merely chuckled, and he and Pang left. The Doctor continued to peer through the telescope, occasionally swinging or tilting it on to a new bearing, and making notes on a piece of paper.

Major Chesterton was walking in a hall of mirrors. The hall was in total darkness, with no sources of light, yet he could see the reflections clearly enough. Variations on his own face leered at him shouting questions.

'Who are you?' a scar-faced Chesterton demanded.

'How long have you been here?' An old, white-haired version of himself asked.

'Who is she?' the younger one demanded.

Then the reflections started to step out of the mirrors and attack him. He fought back as best he could, but his other selves all seemed to be experts in Chinese boxing of various kinds. Fists and feet pummelled him, driving him down to the ground and then through it.

He was drenched in cold sweat when he woke. He stumbled to a cupboard for a brandy, and took a single hit from the bottle. He had never had a dream like this before. Of course, he had never before been told that there were two of him.

The very idea was utterly preposterous, like something Poe would have made up. Chesterton wanted to laugh, but the earnest expressions on the faces of such a diverse group of reflections gave him pause. He seemed to recall the Scandinavian legend of the Doppelganger, and wondered if this was the kind of thing people had seen.

Perhaps he should see this double for himself, he decided. His mind, falling back into the irrational world of dreams, threw up a last suggestion. Maybe the other Chesterton was the part of him that had been missing since his fall.

Ian was feeling a little jealous of the Doctor hogging the telescope. It was a fine example of nineteenth-century science, and he wouldn't have minded taking a few observations himself. The Doctor finally stepped away from it. He put the paper on a low table and started scribbling furiously, occasionally licking the pencil and mumbling to himself.

Then he looked up from his calculations. His eyes were as bright as new pennies. 'A conjunction,' he chuckled. 'Yes, there's going to be a stellar conjunction of sorts.'

The lightness faded from his voice as he looked at the paper on which he had worked out his sums. 'There are many cycles to the heavens, depending upon which celestial bodies you are relating to. In this case, there seems to be a relationship between the position of the Earth, the moon and several more distant regions of space.'

'What sort of relationship?' Ian asked.

'A two-thousand-year-long cycle, which will soon reach its turning point again.' He looked out of the window, up at the stars in the clear summer sky. 'I must admit to you, Chesterton, that I do not like the look of this at all.'

'Doctor, you're beginning to sound like one of those women who think their horoscopes in the papers actually make sense.'

The Doctor gave him a withering look.

'I'm sorry, Doctor, but what you're talking about sounds more like astrology than astronomy.'

'I'm sure it does, but just because something sounds like something else, it doesn't mean to say that it is that something else.' The Doctor tapped his calculations. 'Suffice it to say that I have good scientific reason to think that this conjunction could well prove dangerous.'

When Fei-Hung reached Po Chi Lam a man was sitting in front of the gateway, leaning against it. Fei-Hung was sure he had never seen him before, but he looked vaguely familiar. He was quite tall and a lot of white was starting to creep into his queue. His lined face had seen many years and probably many fights, and the tattooed forearms that emerged from his exquisite tunic were as solid and taut as if they were moulded out of steel.

The man was asleep and for a moment Fei-Hung wondered whether he should wake him, as he might have been a friend of Jiang's. But he was leaning against the gateway, so he would have to be disturbed anyway. Fei-Hung reached out to touch him gently, but the man's eyes opened before he could do so and he sprang to his feet.

'I'm terribly sorry, I didn't want to wake anyone at this hour,' Fei-Hung said.

The newcomer put his hands on his hips and looked askance at him.

'Good grief,' he said. 'Fei-Hung? My word, but you've grown. I haven't seen you since...'

'Do I know you?'

The stranger scratched his nose as he thought about this. 'Well, we've met, but you were very small at the time and probably don't remember. I'm called Iron Bridge Three. I'm a friend of your father's.' He pulled a folded piece of paper from his tunic and handed it to Fei-Hung. It was a letter from Kei-Ying - Fei-Hung recognised his father's calligraphy - inviting the man to come and discuss the current situation.

Fei-Hung handed the letter back and saluted, fist in palm. This man was one of the Ten Tigers, and deserved such respect. 'Come in. I'll wake my father. He'll be glad to see you.'

‘Chesterton...’ the abbot mused. ‘He will be the biggest danger to us in Guangzhou. The Doctor will undoubtedly ally himself with this soldier, who has already been sending out messages to the Ten Tigers. Since Kei-Ying and the Doctor have both survived, we should concentrate on the weakest link.’

‘But there are two Chestertons,’ Zhao said. ‘We’ve been assuming that Major Chesterton has simply taken to wearing civilian clothes, but Jiang has seen the two of them...’

‘They are clearly brothers,’ the abbot said. ‘That presents us with an interesting opportunity.’ He smiled, obviously taken with whatever plan he had in mind. Eerily, Zhao and Gao smiled too, as if the three of them had the same feeling about the same thought.

Both men will be on their guard for our assassins, but how could Major Chesterton suspect his own brother of planning to kill him?’

‘The brother?’

‘Yes. His name is Ian, if Jiang was correct. If we apply the right pressure, he will be able to approach his brother far more closely - and without arousing suspicion - than we could.’

‘What sort of pressure did you have in mind?’

The abbot remembered something Jiang had told him, days ago. ‘He has a woman. Her name is Barbara. If we bring her here, he will do anything we ask to save her life.’

Vicki had seen a lot of activity. First, late the previous night Fei-Hung had brought in a man with the bizarre name of Iron Bridge Three, and the early hours had been filled with the muffled sounds of speech and laughter from the Wongs’ apartments.

Kei-Ying and Iron Bridge had gone off to Xamian before breakfast, neither of them looking at all tired.

Now another stranger had interrupted the dawn exercise patterns in the courtyard. He was big and long-legged, with baggy clothes and a booming voice. He strolled in, did some-

thing of a double take at the sight of Vicki, then grinned and stuck out a hand. 'This is the western custom isn't it?'

Vicki shook his hand. 'Yes, it is. Are you one of the Tigers?' She had been told that other masters might arrive over the coming day or two.

'That's right. Tham Chai Wen. Most people call me Three-Legged Tham. I have a letter from Wong-sifu -' He broke off, looking past her. 'Do you know a large man, about seven feet tall, who likes to wear a cloak and hood, by any chance?'

'No, there's no-one like that here.'

'Ah, then we're in trouble, because four of him are coming this way.'

Vicki turned as he took up a fighting stance.

Tham kicked out at the first cloaked figure, a flurry of feet to the head, and fell in agony clutching his foot the way Jiang had earlier. The figure didn't even wince. It just grabbed Vicki, its fists squeezing her so hard that she thought the bones in her arms would splinter under their grip. It felt like the sort of pressure that could turn a piece of coal into a diamond.

Remembering what little self-defence knowledge she had, she thrust a knee into the figure's groin. White-hot pain exploded through her from her kneecap, but her captor didn't even flinch. It was as if she'd hit solid steel armour, or as if the figure holding her was some kind of robot.

Then one of her arms was free, but before she could take advantage of this, something in the back of her head popped like a flashbulb, and she knew no more.

Students and healers were flying through the air like discarded wrappings when Fei-Hung reached the hall, drawn by the shouts and yells. Three large, cloaked and hooded men were kicking in doors and slapping aside with incredible force anyone who got in their way.

One was dragging Barbara out of her quarters, and Fei-Hung immediately went for him rather than the men fighting with the male staff and students. He had delivered his third punch, and was launching a kick at the cloaked man's head,

when the pain from the fist that had delivered his first punch backed up his arm. The kick faltered and he stepped back, his hands burning.

The man must be wearing armour under that cloak. Not even little plates on leather, but western-style, solid steel breastplates. Fei-Hung was looking for a weapon when something exploded across his shoulder blades, and everything went black.

The Doctor and Ian were in reasonably good spirits when they returned from Zhenhailou with their calculations, but Ian's mood darkened when he saw one of Po Chi Lam's gates lying off its hinges.

Immediately wanting to check on Barbara and Vicki, he dashed through the broken gateway, and stopped. The sight he saw was like the aftermath of the battle for the Alamo. Injured youths lay everywhere, gritting their teeth against pain. Inside the surgery, Fei-Hung and a tall man in baggy clothes were doing their best to treat the most badly wounded. Their task wasn't made any easier by the fact that much of the furniture and many bottles and vials were broken.

'What happened here?'

'An attack,' Fei-Hung said bluntly.

'Who by?'

'Probably friends of Jiang,' the tall man said darkly. 'Or thugs hired by him. The loss of face will have stung him more than his broken foot, and he always had a foulness about him. A nature you could smell from streets away.'

Fei-Hung looked at his swollen hands, and knew from the throbbing in his face that his cheeks and eyelids must look even worse. He didn't want to check this in a mirror. He tried to flex his fingers but they felt glued into position, and a part of his mind thought they might snap off if he pushed them too far. Not that they were much use to him now. They were too painful to use as fists, and too thick and senseless to sift herbs and powders, or handle vials and cups of medicine.

He had never felt so useless. Even as a child he could fetch and carry, or at least watch and learn.

He turned at the sound of footsteps to find the Doctor watching him. The old man's face was inscrutable, but Fei-Hung thought he saw concern in the pattern of his features. Then the Doctor stepped fully into the room, the light on him shifted and his emotions were a mystery again.

The Doctor sighed. 'It seems you may have been right about that foolish man, Jiang.'

'It wasn't Jiang. Three-Legged Tham thinks it was men hired by Jiang, but I don't know.'

Fei-Hung looked down at his hands again.

My *gungfu* skills have been of little use, and with hands like these, I can't prepare medicines properly. If my father was here, it wouldn't matter so much, but -'

'I'm sure Master Wong is just as concerned about how you are, but he wouldn't let it distract him from what he was doing, would he?'

'My father? What has he to do with it?'

'He is a difficult man to live up to, but he is his own man, as are you, young man. If you did your best, you can't find yourself wanting. Now, let's do something practical, hmm? Can you describe these attackers?'

'Not really. They were wearing cloaks and hoods.'

'What about the one you fought? Could you not tell anything from being so close to him? Or even from his fighting style?'

Fei-Hung thought about this. It was natural for him to analyse the style of an opponent. He was glad the same thought had occurred to the Doctor. 'He must have been wearing armour. Not Chinese armour, but steel-plate armour, like in your English stories.'

The Doctor frowned and looked off into the distance. 'That's very interesting, young man. And also very strange.'

'He didn't have much of a fighting style. It was very primitive and relied mostly on just taking punishment no matter what. But it's not very easy to fight in armour.'

Despite the heat of the day, and the thick blindfolds that been wrapped around her and Vicki's heads, Barbara was soaked in a cold sweat as she lay on the floor. With no clue as to the intent of the strong men who had carried them, her imagination had been more than happy to make suggestions of its own. If they intended simply to kill her and Vicki they could easily have done so at Po Chi Lam, but knowing this intellectually hadn't stopped her stomach churning in anticipation of a blade.

If the men weren't bent on murder, the next options her mind inflicted on her were rape or ransom or, possibly, simply leverage.

She struggled, trying to get to her feet, then winced and yelped as the knife that was cutting her bonds caught her hand. The hood was pulled from her face, and she caught a brief glimpse of several men as she looked around to see if Vicki was all right.

The younger girl was looking at her. 'Are you all right?' Barbara asked.

'I think so,' Vicki said nervously. 'I haven't anything broken, anyway. But I think I feel sick.'

The room they were in was large and high ceilinged, with a large dais in the centre. Four statues stood against the wall behind the girls, two flanking the door and one in each corner. They were life-sized soldiers, their bodies carved into the shape of padded tunics and leggings, and armoured jerkins. Their faces were astonishingly lifelike and all four were very individual. They hadn't been merely pulled from a mould.

Three men were on the dais. The two who were standing wore leather armour over silks, with metal plates and studs set into the leather. One was huge and almost too muscle-bound to be real, the other was lean and mean-looking. Both had dark hair tied into topknots. The third man, sitting between them, was wearing fine robes over a well-cut tunic. His hair was almost white, as was his goatee beard.

'Welcome,' the third man said.

Barbara recognised instinctively that these were the men Cheng had described, and that the one who had spoken was the abbot.

‘Just who do you think you are?’ she demanded.

‘Who am I?’ The abbot seemed amused. ‘I am the lord of this land. My name is Qin Shi Huangdi.’

Barbara could feel the blood drain from her face and the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. The words caught in her throat before she could get them out. ‘The First Emperor?’

‘There were others after me?’ He seemed to be struggling to think. ‘Yes,’ he said at last.

‘But the First Emperor died two thousand years ago.’

For a moment the abbot looked shocked, then he smiled. ‘Yes,’ he said finally. ‘Yes, I did.’

5

Qin died.

He didn’t remember all of it. He didn’t remember meeting any of his family, or the bridge of jade, or even the white light he had heard his soldiers talk about after they were wounded. Maybe the living just weren’t meant to remember such things, or maybe the pain of being reborn scrambled it all up in his head.

Dying was easy. The coming back hurt like all hell.

Whether the pain woke him, or his waking kicked the pain into life, he couldn’t tell. All he did know was that every breath was sending fire around his ribs, across his shoulders and down his back. The fire paused in his chest to gather itself, psyching itself up to come out fighting with each new breath.

He rode out the waves of pain and discomfort, welcoming them simply as sensations. They hugged him like long-lost brothers whom he had not seen for a long time. He had forgotten what it felt like to expand his lungs with air and to feel muscles stretch and move.

He was vaguely aware of another man at his feet. That was appropriate. He wondered whether it was Zhao or Gao who was respecting him so. He tried to remember how to make the mouth form words, to speak to the man, but it had been so long that the knowledge escaped him.

The man with the eye patch shuffled backwards, and now Qin could see that his hands were solidly tied behind his back. He was something to do with the owner of this body, then; a prisoner of his.

The man with the eye patch ran, and Qin felt the urge to pursue him and cut him down. It would be a great pleasure to kill a criminal who had been so impudent as to enter his presence. The body still would not obey his commands, and the half-bound man was gone in a moment.

Every particle of his skin tingled, the robes he wore constraining his chest. The sound of running footsteps echoed in the dimness of the cave. The light from a few fallen torches made him wince, and he wished the tingle of air on his skin would stop. He stretched and took a step.

He almost fell, unfamiliar with this body's balance. He didn't remember noticing the need for balance before. Had he simply been gone so long, or was something wrong with this body?

Qin looked around, slowly and carefully, and saw two other men in the same kind of robes he was wearing. They staggered as if they were drunk, and he knew they were Zhao and Gao because only the two generals could possibly be experiencing the same sensations and unfamiliarity with their bodies that Qin was.

For a moment he was overwhelmed by the sense of being in three places at once: Qin, looking at Gao, looking at Zhao, looking at Qin. Somehow - perhaps because of the angles he was seeing them from - he knew that Zhao was the large man with muscles like an ox, and that Gao was now the other man.

There was a voice, too. No, not a voice... a thought, or maybe just a feeling, somewhere at the back of his mind. Somewhere at the back of three of their minds. He didn't

quite catch it, and then it was gone, but he could feel the potential for it to come back.

It took a few minutes to become used to the legs and arms of this body, and learn to ignore the twinges in its back and the niggles posed by its teeth. By then, he was able to walk around almost normally and joined Zhao and Gao in the centre of the chamber. Above them, mercury flowed and glinted wetly.

Gao was looking at his hands, his expression still vacant. Qin suspected his own was no better. 'The wizard spoke truth,' Gao whispered, stumbling over the words with his unfamiliar tongue. 'I wonder how long -'

'It doesn't matter,' Qin said. 'If this is the time, then this is the time.'

Then Qin heard the voice that was not a voice booming in his head. From Zhao's and Gao's expressions he could tell they heard it too.

'This is not quite the time. This is the prelude.'

'Then the Eight Thousand...?' Zhao began.

'The window is too short,' Qin said. But we will need an elite. Perhaps a handful of captains. There is enough for that.'

'Yes,' Zhao replied, in the echoing voice Qin had just heard come from his own lips. 'There is enough of a window for that.'

The two generals, as the abbot had called them, had removed Barbara and Vicki after their audience with the 'emperor' and locked them in what used to be some kind of storage cellar. The walls were still lined with shelves, and the room smelt of vinegar and dark sauces.

'The First Emperor?' Vicki prompted. 'That's impossible, so who is he really?'

Barbara gave the girl a smile, but it faltered, empty of the reassurance it should have had. 'The abbot Cheng spoke about, I assume. And he's - I suppose "insane" is a cruel word - seriously mentally ill.'

'You must not speak of my Lord this way,' the thinner general snapped. He was standing on the other side of the door, sneering at the women through a small window. 'He is the First Emperor, and my brother and I are his generals.'

'The First Emperor? That's impossible,' Barbara insisted. 'You know it is.'

Gao snorted. 'I do not.'

'And if I took you to an asylum in England I could introduce you to any number of people who think they're Julius Caesar, or King Arthur, or Jesus.' Barbara concentrated on what she was saying, to keep the panic out of her voice. 'He needs help; you must see that.'

'The only ones here who need help are yourselves, and there is none here.' Gao turned on his heel and Barbara heard him march away.

'I think they're all crazy,' Vicki said. 'Shouldn't we try to get them to a psychiatric hospital?'

'I don't know, Vicki. Asylums in even the most civilised European cities of this era were places of torture and terror. I'm not sure what good one would do him.'

Ian had searched everywhere and found no sign of Barbara or Vicki. His stomach churned more and more with the increasing certainty that the attackers had taken them. He rejoined the others, who now included Cheng.

'Doctor,' he said, 'Barbara's gone. And Vicki. I've looked everywhere.'

'I saw one of them carry off the young girl,' Three-Legged Tham said.

'And the one I fought was carrying Barbara,' Fei-Hung added.

'I knew it,' Ian snarled, kicking over a wooden stool. 'But who could have done it?'

'Well, I still say Jiang,' Tham said. 'He's petty enough.'

'If it is, I'll-'

'No, Chesterton,' the Doctor interrupted. 'You know, that young man was most disagreeable, and I can certainly believe he would bear a childish grudge, but this raid that took the

girls was too precise and too powerful for him.' He shook his head. 'No, I rather think Mr Jiang would have tried to waylay one of us in the street, or break in and cause trouble on his own. This was more a sort of a military operation.'

'I see what you mean, Doctor,' Ian agreed slowly. 'It does look like some sort of commando raid.'

'A commando raid, yes. That's it exactly, Chesterton. This was a carefully planned raid to snatch the girls and take them away for some purpose.'

'Not to kill them. They'd just have done that here. Leverage?'

'On us, you mean? Yes. I think we will hear from the kidnapers soon enough.'

'Not soon enough for me.'

'We still don't know who they are.'

'I think I might,' Cheng said.

Ian and the Doctor both looked at him.

'The abbot who's split the Black Flag. Jiang was practically worshipping him, and if he's the one who's been razing villages he certainly has the experience of warfare.'

'Now, you've mentioned this abbot before,' the Doctor said. 'Tell me some more about him, if you please.'

'If your women are in his hands... It might have been better for them and for you if they had just died here.'

'And why is that?'

'Because the abbot's insane. I don't mean eccentric or silly. He cut out the eyes and tongue of a friend of mine because he wouldn't say that the unskinned deer in front of him was a roasted pig. Then he carved out the deer's still-warm heart and ate it.' The memory put a cold sweat on Cheng's brow and between his shoulder blades. 'He just isn't human.'

The Doctor looked sharply at Cheng. 'Is that so? We'll see.'

He turned to Tham. 'Sir, when Master Wong wrote to you he will have asked if you have heard of other attacks.'

'Yes, I've heard of other attacks.' Tham unrolled a map. 'The first was here, near Shaoshan. Then further south, east of Guilin. They seem to be concentrating on older towns, monasteries, temples... It makes no sense to me.'

'Tell me,' the Doctor said. 'It is *yuelaan jit*, is it not?' Tham nodded. 'Have there been reports of, shall we say, strange occurrences in the vicinity of these places?'

Tham looked surprised. 'Yes. As a matter of fact when I passed by Guilin last month the Taoist priests there were swamped with requests for exorcisms.'

The Doctor steepled his fingers and looked down his nose at the map. 'Sacred sites, temples and ancient towns. I see...'

'You do?' Ian asked.

'Yes, I think perhaps I do, but I can't be certain, of course. No, I can't be certain.'

'It's just instinct, is it, Doctor?'

'Yes, my boy, instinct.'

'Well, if you've got some kind of theory, is there some way to check up on it? To be certain of it?'

'There would be, if I had a geological map of China. I should rather like to see a layout of China's faults. Fault lines, I mean, and rivers and iron deposits.'

The *gwailo* woman, Barbara, was sleeping. Qin remembered sleep, and not with pleasure. With the darkness had come death, each and every night. Lanterns had never held it back long enough. The worst was not falling asleep, but waking, knowing that life had paused and not knowing how or why it had started again. Being sick to the stomach with terror that the next time there might not be a waking.

The *gwailo* woman, Barbara, showed no signs of such fear. Her face was calm and soft. The softness must hide iron, he thought, to accept that daily taste of death with such equanimity. He had, of course, never seen his own face while asleep, but couldn't imagine anything less than a contorted rictus, desperately struggling to breathe again with the rising of the next dawn.

'Bring her,' he told the guard with him.

The guard opened the store-room door and pulled Barbara out. Qin had her brought to his bedchamber. The woman looked frightened, but unbowed. This was new and therefore interesting to him.

He sat on a chair and indicated for her to sit too. She sat on the floor, pointedly avoiding the large bed, which still held the scent of womanhood from the three girls he had spent the night with.

'You don't fear me the way my own people do,' he said. 'Why is that?'

'Because I've met your type before.'

Such strength of will and mind. He was surprised, as he had been so often since her arrival.

'I do not want you to fear me.' He paused. 'I am told you are a scholar of history. A teacher?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know what I looked like?'

6

Barbara was afraid, though the man she was afraid of was the one who was insane and believed himself to be a historical figure. She certainly wasn't afraid of a monarch dead for two thousand years.

She had been doubly afraid when he had her brought to his bedchamber, but the fear had been knocked aside by bafflement when he asked his question. She didn't understand what he meant at first.

'Do you know what I - Qin Shi Huangdi - looked like?'

For an instant, Barbara thought she saw anguish in his expression and heard yearning in his voice.

'I don't remember,' he said.

'Well, I'm not sure. I know more about European and South American cultures... But I remember seeing a portrait of the First Emperor in a book once. He was quite a large man.' She hesitated.

'You mean fat.'

'I imagine palace food for the Emperor is richer than for his subjects.'

'Continue, *gwailo*,' he said quietly.

'He looked severe, unforgiving. He had a longish black beard.'

The man's fingers reached up to his own white whiskers.

'It's ironic,' the abbot - Barbara didn't know what his real name was, but it was unlikely to be Qin - said. 'A foreigner knowing more about me than my own subjects.' He frowned. 'Of course, it is a spy's job to know such things.'

'We are not spies.'

'Yet you come to me with fine words, trying to draw my secrets from me.'

'You kidnapped us, remember?' Barbara said pointedly.

'You have friends. I wish them to do something for me.'

Barbara felt a slight relief. At least it was not lust that was driving him.

'Then I can complete my work here.'

'Work? Raiding towns, killing... Do you love war so much?' she demanded. 'Does it make you feel like a big man to raze a town, or order people to work or to fight or to die?'

'Yes,' he said sharply, and somehow the sharpness told Barbara that he was lying. 'That's the best thing in life.'

"The greatest pleasure is to vanquish your enemies and chase them before you," Barbara said. "To rob them of their wealth and see those dear to them bathed in tears, to ride their horses and clasp to your bosom their wives and daughters." That's what Genghis Khan said.'

The abbot left her then and walked out on to the hillside. The sun was sinking, casting a honeyed light across the dusty path and enriching the woodland shadows. If he closed his eyes he fancied he could feel the trees, as if some emanation from them was pressing against him. He could hear his people moving around, attending to their duties and serving him with their loyalty.

Something spread up from his spine and out across his shoulders, enveloping his chest. It felt like the softest fur - sensual, warm, comforting. He vaguely remembered it from long, long ago. It was the best thing in life.

These were his woods, his trees, his country and his people. If anything other than his love for them could bring him that spreading happiness, he had yet to find it.

Kei-Ying, Iron Bridge Three and Major Chesterton pored over the military maps in Chesterton's office. With a practical military problem to solve, Chesterton was able to push the mystery of his duplicated self to the back of his mind.

'From what... Mr Iron Bridge has said I think it's clear that this abbot and his followers have been coming south for a while.'

'How can we find out where they came from?' Kei-Ying asked.

'We can retrace the advances of the battle lines. They may have tried to disguise their origins by flanking manoeuvres, but if we have a chronology of which places were attacked - or persuaded to join their cause - we should be able to track them back.'

'Good,' Iron Bridge snapped. 'Then let's get on with it, shall we?'

Ian paced around the main hall at Po Chi Lam, unable to settle. If only there was something he could do, a place he could go.

'Cheng,' he said. 'You met this abbot person. Can't you tell us where?'

'It was aboard a junk. It moves around. I don't know where it would be now.'

'Can't we put the word out to these Tigers of yours and have them look for it.'

'We're foreign to you, not stupid, Chesterton. Of course we've done that.'

Ian resented Cheng's tone, but knew it was deserved. 'I'm sorry. It's just...'

'Barbara is your woman. I understand.'

'Ha!' the Doctor exclaimed, attracting Ian's attention.

He looked from his sheet of calculations to a map from Kei-Ying's study, 'I should estimate the focal point will be there,' he stabbed a finger on to the map, 'somewhere in Shaanxi province.' His lips thinned. 'Very near to Xianyang.'

'Focal point?' Ian asked.

'I'll show you,' the Doctor said.

Qin Shi Huangdi was the only name he knew himself by. The face that stared back at him from the mirror had undoubtedly had a different name, but he had no idea what it might be.

In the mirror he saw Zhao step into the room behind him and kneel.

‘My Lord.’ Zhao lowered his eyes to the floor, respectfully.

The muscle-bound frame that knelt no doubt also had a different name, as had the lean body of Gao. Qin wondered whether either of them had any inkling of what those names were.

‘Yes, General,’ Qin acknowledged.

‘The caravan to Xianyang is in operation, my Lord.’

‘Good. We can return there shortly.’

‘What about the *gwailo* women?’

‘Bring the tall, dark-haired one with us.’

Zhao hesitated, and Qin could feel his indecision. ‘My Lord, she is a historian and teacher. Your orders are to leave none such alive.’

Qin looked down at his hands and studied them, trying to remember whether they were similar to, or different from, the hands he used to have. ‘And she will die when I have extracted from her all that I wish to know. She comes with us.’

‘And the girl?’

‘Who?’ The image of a younger *gwailo* girl came belatedly into his mind. Another...traveller? As if it mattered whether she was living in China or just visiting. She was nothing. ‘Zhao may kill her at his leisure.’

‘It shall be done,’ the abbot knew this as certainly as if Zhao had made the promise aloud. When he turned, Zhao was already gone.

The Doctor led his little group through to a small hall in the eastern wing. The ceiling was high enough for climbing ropes to dangle from the beams. Shafts of sunlight came through what would have been upstairs windows if the hall had an upper floor.

Picking a grapefruit from a bowl in one hand, the Doctor took a delicate pen in the other and began to draw lightly on the skin of the fruit.

‘What on Earth are you doing?’ Ian asked, intrigued despite himself.

‘Arranging a little demonstration. Actions speak louder than words, eh?’

Ian couldn’t deny this. He looked over the Doctor’s shoulder and saw that he was drawing a rough outline of the Earth’s continents on the dimpled skin.

The Doctor put the grapefruit on to a low stool and positioned it near one wall. Then he pulled a couple of spare pince-nez from his pockets and popped the lenses out of their frames. He called to four young students and handed each of them a lens before sending them up the climbing ropes.

Ian watched, puzzled, as the Doctor directed the students to go up or down a little, and then to hold out the lenses in their hands. All was explained when the first lens caught the sunlight from the high window and beamed it to the other lenses and onwards. A narrow pinpoint of light glowed on the grapefruit, in the heart of the outline of China. In seconds, the skin of the fruit began to smoulder, then blacken, and a thin column of smoke rose from it.

‘A magnifying glass a few inches away would have done the same thing,’ Ian said.

‘It would, but what if you are much further away and still want to transmit focused energy to an exact spot? You require a sequence of elements between you and your target. If you are relying on nature, the motions of the stars, to provide this sequence of elements then you are constrained by the rhythms of the universe.’

‘You mean orbital cycles?’

‘Yes, and every now and again several orbits coincide and you have a conjunction. A sequence of elements between the Earth and a most dangerous region of the cosmos.’

‘And then people there can use that sequence to transmit something to Earth?’

‘Not people, young man. Intelligences. Sentient influences. Beings quite beyond our kind of imagination.’

‘And what would they be sending to Earth?’

‘That I don’t know, and cannot until it happens. Perhaps energy, or their discrete sentiences in person, or memes and programs. It could be anything, but whatever it is will not be a good thing for the people of your Earth.’

Kei-Ying and Iron Bridge both stabbed their fingers at the same point on the map, in central China. Chesterton, who had been about to do the same, was astonished. These men hadn’t been trained by the British army, yet they had as good a grasp of strategy as he had himself.

‘Somewhere in this vicinity, I should think,’ Iron Bridge was saying. ‘Shaanxi province.’

Kei-Ying nodded in agreement.

‘Very odd,’ Chesterton said.

Both Tigers looked at him expectantly.

‘What makes you say that?’ Kei-Ying asked.

‘If they’re some sort of rebels, why not head east, for Peking, Nanking and Shanghai? It’s a shorter journey and the juiciest targets are there.’

‘Perhaps the Doctor will know.’

That afternoon Kei-Ying returned to Po Chi Lam. He paused for a moment, feeling as if he were sinking into the arms of his beloved wife. Then he walked on to tell the Doctor his news.

‘Doctor,’ he said as he entered the main hall. ‘We’ve calculated the abbot’s region of origin. If Chesterton and I are correct, it’s -’

‘In Shaanxi province,’ the Doctor said. ‘Yes, do try to keep up, will you?’ He handed Kei-Ying his calculations and pointed to the map. ‘Xianyang.’

Kei-Ying’s eyebrows rose. ‘I have never heard of such a place.’

‘It isn’t called that any more, but that was its name the last time there was a conjunction like this one. No, today it is called Xi’an, I believe.’

‘Xi’an.’

Ian chuckled at the Doctor’s trumping of Kei-Ying. He had long since ceased to be amazed by anything the Doctor did. At least, he told himself he had, but it was a pleasant lie, like believing in Santa Claus, and the truth was just as reassuring.

A child came up to him. ‘Mr Chesterton?’

‘Yes?’

‘There is a messenger for you, at the gate.’

‘Thanks’

Ian went outside and crossed the courtyard to the gateway. One gate was closed, the other was in a woodworking room for repairs. A man stood on the other side of the space the missing gate would have occupied. He lowered his hood as Ian approached, revealing an angular yet handsome face, and a topknot of black hair. Ian could make out the edge of armour below his collar.

‘Ian Chesterton?’

‘I am. Who wants to know?’

‘I am General Gao. I have a message for you.’

‘I see.’

Ian stretched out his hand, expecting to be given paper or a scroll. Instead, Gao held up a wristwatch. Ian recognised it immediately; there were few enough of these in 1865. ‘Where did you get that?’

‘From its owner. The woman Barbara and the girl Vicki are in the custody of my master. If you wish them released, you will kill your brother by sundown tomorrow.’

‘My brother?’ Ian realised immediately that the man must mean Major Chesterton. Well, there was enough of a similarity between them, and Ian supposed it was a logical assumption for someone not acquainted with the idea of time travel to make. ‘You mean Major Chesterton.’

'If he still lives by dark tomorrow...' Gao left the words hanging. He flexed his fingers around the watch and, with a sharp crack like the splitting of a bone, his hand balled into a fist. When he opened it splinters of metal, and tiny cogs and springs, trickled to the floor.

'You understand?'

The abbot's face didn't smile, though Qin felt it should. The male time traveller understood perfectly what Gao meant. Qin didn't understand how he knew this and nor did he care.

All that mattered was that his resurrection was going according to plan, just as the sorcerer had foreseen, and his generals were doing their jobs as well as if they were a part of his own mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Prodigal Son

1

Ian rushed into the surgery, telling himself he was delivering important news urgently and not panicking. He knew it was a lie.

‘Doctor!’

‘What is it, Chesterton?’ The Doctor was all business in response to Ian’s tone.

‘I’ve just had a visitor - he says he has Barbara and Vicki.’
‘You mean a kidnapper?’

As if it wasn’t blindingly bloody obvious, Ian thought, then realised this was the voice of panic and fear speaking. He forced himself to take a deep breath and approach the situation rationally. Anything else would just make things worse.

‘Who was this man?’ the Doctor asked.

Ian had hardly any idea of the personalities of this time and place. I don’t know. He said his name was Gao.’

‘Can you describe him?’

‘About your height, lean, short hair. The cloak he was wearing hung pretty oddly, as if there was more than just man under there.’

‘Weapons and armour, you mean?’

‘I couldn’t swear to it, of course, but, yes, I think so.’

‘Good!’

‘Good?’ Ian was stunned. ‘What’s good about it?’

‘For one thing, my boy, it means this abbot is convinced we are a threat to him, and hopefully that means we are. Secondly, if they are using Barbara and Vicki as leverage they will be kept alive for the moment, and that is the most important thing.’

Barbara and Vicki had been fed steamed dumplings and vegetables. They had been given small cups of rice wine to wash the food down with, which tasted to Barbara like petrol flavoured with soy sauce.

‘We have to escape,’ Vicki said. ‘That abbot’s insane, worse than Bennett. You know it’s only a matter of time before he kills us. Or worse.’

Barbara looked at the door. ‘I’m not so sure, Vicki. There’s something about the way he talks. I almost half-believe him.’

‘That he’s possessed by the spirit of an ancient emperor?’ Vicki was surprised. Based on what she knew of Ian and Barbara so far, she hadn’t thought the citizens of the twentieth century were quite that superstitious or primitive. ‘But it’s impossible,’ she said. ‘At least it is without having access to machines and technology that haven’t been invented yet.’

‘I know that. But electric torches haven’t been invented yet either, and I know both the Doctor and Ian carry pen torches.’

Barbara laid her hand on the wall, feeling the roughness of the brickwork. ‘Vicki, do you know anything about this “stone tape” idea the Doctor had when we told him about that little house?’

‘Well, I’ve heard of it, of course. It’s quite simple really. Metallic oxides in...’

‘Yes, I’ve heard about all of that side of it from Ian as well. I was wondering if it could, I don’t know, work the other way.’

‘The other way?’

‘Yes. I mean, what if he really is Qin Shi Huangdi? What if he somehow recorded himself into one of these stone tapes, and then that recording was put into the abbot? Could that be possible?’

‘Neural technology wasn’t on my syllabus, but... an AI can respond to what you do,’ Vicki said. ‘An artificial intelligence,’ she added for Barbara’s benefit.

‘Artificial intelligence?’

‘AIs are sort of like recordings in computers, but they can think for themselves and hold conversations, fight against

you in games... What they do or say will change depending on what you do or say.'

Light flooded across the room, interrupting their conversation. The abbot was standing in the doorway. 'Computers,' he said. 'Neural technology. No-one on this insignificant world knows of such things. How is it that you do?'

Vicki felt as guilty as she was terrified. She had let something slip that she shouldn't have, and it might well benefit their captor. Her face fell, sinking with her heart.

The abbot regarded her, but not as coldly as she had expected. Was there something he wanted from her? She hoped not.

'You were borne to this time and this place by a TARDIS?'

'Yes.' Vicki was too surprised to hesitate long enough to lie.

'Vicki!' Barbara complained plaintively Vicki wanted to cringe away from the betrayed look in her eyes.

Barbara could have slapped Vicki for being so stupid. She might be from a more advanced time, and have had a more advanced education, but she was still a child.

'What do you -' She broke off as light flared from the abbot's eyes. It was as if someone had thrown a switch to turn on the headlights of a car.

'Then you are a traveller?' his voice boomed. 'You are both travellers?'

'I am a teacher. A history teacher,' Barbara said. 'You know that. But I travel these days, yes.'

'Through the space-time vortex?'

The voice was oddly inflected and not simply with a Chinese accent. It sounded mournful, the way the man in the moon might sound if he could talk.

'Yes,' Barbara admitted, too startled to say anything else.

'You travel with this girl,' he indicated Vicki, 'and the one called Chesterton?'

'Yes.'

The being - she wasn't sure that it was the abbot, or even Qin Shi Huangdi - stepped forward. The glow inside his head was so bright it was beginning to show through the flesh of

his cheeks and between the gaps in his teeth. The hairs on the back of her neck began to rise, twitched by some kind of electricity.

‘And the Doctor?’

Barbara gasped. How could whatever this was know about the Doctor?

‘How -’ She bit off the words, but it was too late. Booming laughter echoed around the room and through her head.

‘This Chesterton. This... other Chesterton? He is your husband?’

She started to say ‘Yes’, telling herself it was only a useful lie to discourage him from getting any lecherous ideas about her. But she decided that if he had such plans in mind she would have found out already. She had been in his bedchamber, after all. Besides, she was increasingly sure that this new voice belonged to neither Qin nor the abbot. Something new was happening here that she didn’t quite understand.

‘No, he’s not my husband.’

It was an easy mistake to make. She and Ian had essentially been living together since they entered the TARDIS nearly two years ago. She supposed they knew each other as well as any married couple who’d been together for the same length of time.

‘Not yet, anyway,’ she added.

Barbara was determined not to give the abbot, or Qin, whatever it was he wanted. The light from his eyes and mouth bore down on her like the headlights of an approaching car that can freeze a rabbit in its tracks.

‘What do you want of us?’ she repeated, trying to sound more brave - or at least less afraid - than she felt. She tried to sound more like her father. ‘Whatever it is, I doubt it can be for the best.’

‘Your loyalty,’ the voice responded. ‘Join with us and rule in your time.’

‘What do you mean... join?’

‘We would have humans speak for us and carry our wishes to your people,’ the mournful voice boomed. ‘We offer you

more than freedom.’ The voice seemed to echo metallically. It was as if the syllables were being beaten out on a gong. ‘We offer you your world.’

At first Barbara couldn’t believe what the voice had said, nor understand what it meant. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘We would have dominion over this world for all time. We would have rulers in all times. Our dominion over this world is inevitable. You will oversee it for us.’

Barbara didn’t know what to say, or whether to believe that this lunatic - or whatever he or it was - was offering her the rulership of the entire world. She couldn’t imagine why he, or it, thought she would have any idea what to do with the world.

‘Why us? What makes you think we’d want to rule the world, or even have any idea what to do with it?’

‘You are not like the other organic beings on this world. You are more advanced.’

‘I see... You sensed that, did you?’

‘We know you are a traveller in time. You have seen many worlds, and many times.’ Qin, the abbot - whoever - turned away.

Barbara felt herself start forward to see if she could help, then remembered that he was holding her captive and was unlikely to be in need of her sympathy. All the same, she felt that he did need help of some kind, and not just the psychiatric treatment she had thought about earlier.

Then he turned back, the light gone from his eyes. ‘Walk with me, woman,’ he said to Barbara.

A guard appeared at his side and grabbed Barbara by the arm, dragging her out of the room.

‘I was ruler of China, woman! The first ruler of it all.’ He fell silent again.

‘Yes,’ Barbara agreed. ‘You were ruler of all China. But not this China.’

‘This China? Are there other Chinas?’ he sneered.

‘No, there’s just the one. But it’s changed since the time of Qin Shi Huangdi. Every map in the world has been redrawn

thousands of times since those days. Different peoples and races have moved around, come and gone.'

'This I understand,' he admitted. I was listening while you and the girl talked.'

He seemed unsettled, much to Barbara's surprise. He looked haunted and jumpy. Not at all like the image of hands-on dictator that he showed to his men.

'You have said you could help me.'

'Yes,' Barbara stammered, feeling a little more confident. Perhaps the abbot was just mentally ill after all, though she couldn't think of an explanation for the glowing eyes. 'I might be able to, if you let us go.'

'That I cannot do,' the abbot said immediately. 'I still need your friend Ian to kill Major Chesterton - and don't imagine I won't kill you if I have to.'

Barbara's fear came back with a vengeance.

'I don't even know who this body belongs to,' Qin insisted. 'A warrior monk, I'm told.' He shrugged. 'That's as much as I know, or care, about him. Nothing of him remains.' He hesitated. 'At least, not here.'

'Then where?'

'Nowhere, I hope.'

'If you want my help,' Barbara said, 'then I need to ask you something.'

He didn't tell her not to ask, or otherwise try to silence her, so she pressed on. 'If you really are the First Emperor, how did you come to be in this body? It's not your original, surely?'

For minutes that felt like hours he simply stood with his back to her, not replying. She couldn't see his face, nor could she read his body language particularly well, but she hoped he was thinking about what she had asked him.

It was clear he thought some part of his life was missing, or at least hidden from him, and she wished she could give it back. Unfortunately, she couldn't even decide which he was the one with a missing element to his life. Qin? Or the abbot?

‘A great wizard of Japan told me how to cheat death,’ he said at last. ‘He told me the materials with which to surround myself. How my spirit could live outside the flesh. If you can call it living.’

‘He didn’t tell you how long it would be before you found another body?’

‘No. Nor how slowly time passes in the darkness when you have naught but your own thoughts for company. I followed the wizard’s instructions to the letter,’ Qin said. ‘My generals and I, and the Eight Thousand, took our assigned places in the sacred space that had been built to the wizard’s specifications.’

‘At the seventh full moon of the year we watched the night swallow the moon, and then...’ He frowned, remembering. ‘Then there was darkness. No bridge of jade, no celestial temples.’

‘No heaven?’

‘No hell. But then, I imagine there wouldn’t be for the immortals.’

He shivered at the thought of the darkness. He had no idea how long he had been alone with his thoughts. No sight, no sound, no touch of silk or flesh, no taste of meat or wine. Having only his own thoughts for company, yet also sensing that he was not alone, because his generals and his troops were with him. ‘I thought I would walk the earth for ever.’

He looked at the guard. ‘Return her to her room.’

The guard steered Barbara back through the kitchens towards the store room, the keys to its door jingling in his hand. It occurred to Barbara that he would not be expecting a white woman - or any woman, probably - to overpower him. He would have to at least partly turn his back to unlock the door, and perhaps she would have a chance to do something then.

They reached the door and the guard made Vicki step further back into the room before he opened it. He never expected Barbara to reach forward and pull the sword from

his belt. He reached for a dagger, opening his mouth to raise the alarm, but Barbara swung the blade as best she could.

The flat of the blade smacked against his ear and he dropped before he could shout. Barbara pushed the door open. 'Come on,' she urged Vicki.

Delighted at Barbara's ingenuity, Vicki could barely contain her excitement as she ran through the door. Still holding the sword, Barbara led her towards what Vicki hoped was a supply entrance to the kitchen.

As they emerged out on to the terraces, Vicki heard a shout from the kitchen. Either the guard had woken up or another one had found him.

'Run,' Barbara told her, tossing the sword aside.

Both women dashed to opposite sides of the terrace. Vicki hoped the guards would follow her and allow Barbara to get away, but she knew Barbara would be hoping the reverse. She heard a scream from behind her, and Barbara's voice shouting 'Keep going!' Vicki didn't dare stop to look round, but from fear of Barbara's sharp tongue rather than the guards. She bolted for the town, and quickly lost herself in the rubble.

She could hear guards moving around, their armour and weapons rattling, and tried to be quiet now that she was out of their sight. She had no idea where she was, but hoped that if she could reach the river a boat might perhaps carry her downstream to Guangzhou.

Qin was furious when the guards dragged Barbara to him as he stood on the hillside. Her head was still ringing from where one of them had backhanded her.

'This is how you "help" me?' he snarled. 'Poisonous viper! You had best pray to whatever barbarian gods you worship that Ian kills Chesterton, because if he does not I will slake my thirst for vengeance with your head!'

'I can help you,' Barbara insisted, knowing it was a lost cause. 'There's another possibility.'

She felt guilty for what she was about to say. If the abbot really was mentally ill she would only compound the problem. However, she had seen enough strangeness on her travels to entertain the possibility that what he was saying was true, in which case her theory might also be true.

‘Perhaps what you’ve told me is completely true, all of it. Then, what if the recording of your mind was somehow changed? Edited to remove unnecessary or undesirable elements.’

‘By whom?’

‘I don’t know. Who says it had to have been by anyone? Perhaps it just didn’t work properly, and only part of what Qin was actually survived. Don’t you see what I’m getting at?’ Barbara didn’t want to shout, but she could feel her voice rising and tried to stifle it. ‘Even if what you’re saying is true, you can’t be the original Qin. You’re a copy of his mind and memories. Even Qin’s dynasty died with his son.’

Qin reeled as if struck. ‘I had a son...?’

‘Qin Shi Huangdi would have remembered that, surely?’

‘I am he!’ Qin roared. Thirty-odd years of blood and fire tingled in his nostrils. He heard the screams of the executed and cheers of the honoured. He could see the battlefields he had fought on as clearly as if he was still standing on them. He could hear the cheers that had greeted his ascension to the throne of a unified China as if the trees around him were shouting their triumph.

He knew he’d had women, but why couldn’t he see their faces in his mind? He couldn’t remember the name of any woman from his palace at Xianyang, yet he knew the names of every one of the Eight Thousand who had accompanied him on that last, glorious campaign.

The birth of a son and heir would have been a momentous event, but he remembered no such occasion. So why did this Bar-Bara insist there had been one? To catch him out? Prove to him that he was just a deluded old abbot who imagined himself to be the unifier of China?

The most frightening thing was the thought that she might be right. What if he, Qin Shi Huangdi, was really dead and gone to dust long ago, cheated of the eternal rulership that was his divine right? What if he was just an old monk who'd been hit on the head once too often?

Qin sank to the floor, pulling his knees up and huddling around them. If he could make himself small enough he could hide from that fear.

The lights blazed on behind his face.

'Yes,' something boomed, and Barbara realised her mistake - if the abbot was possessed by Qin, then Qin was also possessed by something else!

Terrified beyond words, she was dragged back to the store room.

With no boats usable, Vicki had slipped into the water and hung on to a log that was floating downstream. She hoped it would give her cover from any watching guards as well as keep her afloat.

Her plan had worked well enough, but she hadn't counted on soon foiling asleep in the water. She coughed herself awake, vomiting up muddy river water as something pulled at her arms and pressed on her back. She screamed, thinking a guard had caught her. A grubby but strong hand pressed against her mouth to silence her as she was rolled over.

'It's all right, I'm a friend!'

The speaker was a short, middle-aged man whose grey-veined hair was too unkempt to be called a queue. It was more of a Gordian knot.

'I don't believe you!'

'I came from Po Chi Lam. Wong-sifu and your friend the Doctor sent me.'

'And who exactly are you?'

He smiled and puffed himself up as if he were a VIP in full evening dress. 'My name is Soh Hut Yi. Most of my peers call me Beggar Soh.'

'I can't imagine why,' Vicki said in spite of herself. 'Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way.'

The man merely grinned, a yellowed wall of teeth. 'I bet you can.'

He held out a grimy flask that looked like something that had originally belonged inside an animal. 'Want a drink?' He unstopped the flask, letting out something that smelt like used reactor coolant from a spaceship.

'No thanks,' Vicki said politely. 'I'm... trying to give it up.'

'Oh. That's probably wise,' the man said, and guzzled the contents in one go without any apparent effect. He tossed the flask aside and clapped his hands together. 'Well now,' he said with a grin, 'I suppose we should get you back to Po Chi Lam, shouldn't we?' His eyes sparkled conspiratorially.

2

Vicki knew she should be delighted to be back at Po Chi Lam and with the Doctor and Ian again, but she wasn't. She couldn't get over the feeling that she had been wrong to leave Barbara. She felt sure Ian was hating her for not staying, or not managing to rescue Barbara from that awful place.

The Doctor and Ian both acted as if it was all right, of course. They smiled and said nice things about her bravery, and insisted that she had done the right thing, but they were only words. She was sure she had let the side down.

'But if you escaped,' she imagined she heard Ian thinking, 'then where's Barbara?'

Vicki looked at his pretend-happy face, and wished someone would call her away so that she wouldn't have to say anything. She took a sip of water, suddenly needing to wet her lips. 'Barbara thinks she can help the abbot get better. She thinks he might be just mentally ill.'

Ian blinked and his eyes were unfocused for an instant, as if he had taken a punch. 'That's our Barbara, all right.'

'This is most unfortunate,' the Doctor said. He stepped out into the courtyard and looked up into the heavens. He looked haunted for a moment. 'Most unfortunate.'

'Whether he's just mentally ill or something more,' Ian said, 'we can't just leave Barbara to him. Who knows what he might be doing with - or to - her.'

'And what do you suggest?' the Doctor asked.

'That we mount some sort of rescue mission.'

'That would be incredibly dangerous,' Beggar Soh warned. 'As a matter of fact, almost suicidal.'

'I've risked my life for Barbara before.'

'Oh, Ian, I don't know,' Vicki said. 'I think we should rescue her, but we probably need the army. Something was definitely strange about that abbot.'

She didn't think it was anything as mundane as insanity. She knew there were illnesses, even in her own time, that caused the sufferer to hallucinate or to generate other personalities, some of which might be those of historical, mythical or fictional characters. She had never heard of glowing eyes being symptoms of such an illness.

Aliens, she thought. Either the abbot and his 'generals' must be aliens posing as humans, or they must be in the thrall of some kind of parasitic being that had taken control of their bodies. She had heard stories from her father, and other people on the ship to Astra, about creatures that could do that.

She shivered. Neither possibility was particularly pleasant.

'Then let's get the army. We have to rescue Barbara!' Ian said. He looked around for a weapon, or a disguise that would get him into wherever she was being held.

'We will rescue her, Chesterton,' the Doctor told him. 'We will. But you can't just rush off and fight your way in.'

'I can slip in. Disguise myself...'

'I see, and can you disguise your face as that of a Chinaman?'

This stopped Ian in his tracks.

'Exactly.'

'I'll go,' Fei-Hung said. Ian looked at him in surprise. Behind the young man his father sported a momentary smile of pride.

'I can't ask you to fight my battles for me.'

‘There is no “my” battle,’ Fei-Hung said quietly. ‘There is only right and wrong. And that battle is everyone’s.’

Ian felt a momentary swell of thanks, and a general pride in humanity. ‘Thank you, Fei-Hung. I can’t say enough to thank you for even thinking that.’

‘We’ll all go,’ Kei-Ying said suddenly. ‘Tham, Iron Bridge, Beggar Soh, all of us.’

The Doctor nodded his agreement. ‘And Major Chesterton will want to be involved. I will speak to him and see if I can borrow some of his men. That will take time, so I suggest that you,’ he indicated Fei-Hung, ‘act purely as a scout. Check out the lay of the land and see if Barbara is still there.’

‘The Doctor is right,’ Kei-Ying said. ‘You scout ahead and we will follow.’

Fei-Hung nodded. ‘Yes, Father.’

Beggar Soh interlocked his fingers and looked out from under his brows at Fei-Hung. ‘It seems we have a Tiger Cub,’ he grinned.

Fei-Hung walked out of Po Chi Lam on what might be his last night on Earth. He knew he was probably overdramatising the situation, but tomorrow he would undertake a journey as a compatriot of not just the Black Flag or the Guangzhou militia, but also of the Ten Tigers of Guangdong - or three of them, at least.

He found himself outside Miss Law’s window without consciously realising that this was where he was going. He tapped on the window quietly so as not to disturb her parents. After a moment she opened it, and let him in to her small fruit-scented bedroom.

‘Fei-Hung.’ She hugged him. He inhaled the scent of her hair, freshly washed but not perfumed. It was natural and pleasant.

‘I wanted to see you tonight,’ he said. He wanted to continue, to tell her that she might never see him again, but the words caught in his chest.

‘Something’s wrong,’ she said. ‘Is it your father?’

‘No. I... I have something to do. Something dangerous.’

He didn't want to say any more. Barbara's face floated into his vision, wracked with sobs and angry tears as it had been when her beloved was fallen. He closed his eyes as he embraced Miss Law, and Barbara's face became hers, weeping and lamenting for him.

'Whatever it is,' she whispered into his ear, 'you know I will believe it right.'

He swallowed hard, trying not to imagine the pain she would have in her heart, or the all-encompassing numbness that would freeze her mind if she saw him dead or crippled. He didn't want to go. What sort of lover could put his beloved through such a trauma?

He pulled slightly away from her, so that he could look at her. 'I can't go.'

She touched his face. 'You're afraid.'

Fei-Hung shook his head. 'I'm not afraid of anyone. It's just-'

'You're afraid of hurting me. Or upsetting me.' She held his gaze. 'Tell me honestly, Fei-Hung. Is what you're going to do dangerous?'

'Perhaps.' In truth, he didn't know, but he could guess. 'Probably. I'm not afraid of death or injury, but I can't put you through the emotions that you would feel if either of those things happened. I've seen it on the face of a friend of my father's when her man was beaten and broken, and I would rather not have such a look in your eyes, whether I was there to see it or not. It would be as if I was attacking you.'

She held him tighter, and the sound of her breath next to his ear was as natural and soothing as the surf on a beach, or the passage of a bird's wing through the air.

'You wouldn't even have considered going if it wasn't in a just cause.'

'No, I wouldn't.'

'Then the cause is... ?'

'The woman I spoke of, a friend of my father's, is being held hostage to force her man to commit murder. I hoped to find her, and free her.'

'Then if I was selfish enough not to let you go and the man was killed, or the woman died by her captor's hands, it would be as bad as if I had slit those throats myself. Could you inflict that upon me?'

'No.' Fei-Hung was torn. He would be harming her either way. 'I can't go, but I can't not go

'The man I love wouldn't put a selfish concern above saving an innocent life. And I doubt he could really love a woman who did that either.' She smiled, tears in her eyes that made him want to break down into sobs. It wasn't guilt that made his cheeks wet, but the sheer quantity and strength of his emotions.

'If I... ?' He swallowed and looked at the floor. He cursed the fact that he couldn't control his tongue as well as he could control the rest of himself.

'When I come back, will you marry me?'

'I thought I was going to have to wait until our fathers arranged it.' She kissed him. 'Yes, of course.'

'Then I suppose I'll have to come back alive.'

In his bedchamber Barbara's words echoed around Qin's mind, chasing him and snapping at him, and not letting him have a moment's rest. Madness, she had suggested, an incomplete spell for immortality. Even possession within possession. This was not what the wizard had promised him. Qin kicked a table over and the noise drew Gao. The general burst in, sword at the ready. He put it away when he saw that there was no-one else in the room.

Qin continued to rage, and tore at the grey hair that had begun to grow again from his borrowed scalp. 'Who am I? What am I?'

'You are the First Emperor of China -'

'No!' He whirled on Gao pointing a silencing finger. 'I have memories of rulership, of passing laws, of ordering executions, of leading my people to battle... but those are the only memories I have. If I founded a dynasty why do I not remember my sons? If I had sons, why do I not remember?'

'It must be something in the abbot's mind resisting you.'

‘There is no abbot’s mind!’ Qin stopped and turned to the mirror he had been using to judge his new face in earlier. ‘Or is there?’ He felt a fear that he had never known before. He thought he had been afraid of death, terrified by it, but now he felt something far more disturbing.

‘Am I a fiction - a diseased part of this abbot’s mind? Do I really not exist at all, except in my own imagination, in a head I only think I have taken possession of from its rightful owner?’

‘If that were true, how could you remember your life two thousand years ago?’ Gao asked.

‘How do I know that I do?’ Qin demanded. ‘How do I know that what I remember is a true memory, and not just a dream or a wish that I think is a memory?’

‘The *gwailo* woman must be a sorceress; she has bewitched you. Let me kill her for you,’ Gao pleaded. ‘The pleasure in her suffering will remind you of the truth, and she will no longer poison your mind with her evil. Let those who love you serve you.’

‘She must not die!’

‘Why not?’ Gao asked.

Qin realised that he didn’t know. He wanted to say, ‘Yes, kill her,’ but the words would not come. ‘Because it is not fated,’ he snapped at last.

‘Then it is time to fetch her. We must go tonight. The conjunction is upon us.’

Qin realised he had almost lost track of the time. He nodded. ‘Bring her outside.’

Gao saluted and left. Qin went outside. There, Zhao was waiting. The rage in Qin’s mind had burnt itself out for now, but he knew it would be back and shivered inwardly at the thought.

Gao soon dragged Barbara out to meet them and Qin grabbed her by the wrist. Light blazed from his eyes and mouth and he raised both hands. Zhao and Gao stepped forward, the light from their eyes and mouths joining the light from Qin’s, and raised their hands too. Electric fire

crackled around their forearms and fingers, and lashed out like grasping claws.

The lightning merged between the three monks and snatched and tore there, ripping a hole in the air. Through the ragged gap, which was edged with actinic fire, Barbara could see a dusty hillside covered with the stumps of cut-down bushes.

Qin reached a hand back and grabbed her wrist. Then he stepped through the hole, pulling her with him.

3

Beggar Soh and Vicki had described their journey back to Guangzhou in great detail. It was simple enough for Fei-Hung to follow it in reverse. He had taken a small sailing dinghy, leaving a few coins on the jetty at the docks where it had been moored. The tide was coming in and had given the boat a much-needed boost upstream. He had beached the dinghy as soon as he saw the tops of the junk's masts in the distance and gone the rest of the way on foot.

The town was deserted. He had expected at least some of the guards the abbot had lured from the Black Flag still to be around, or maybe some prisoners, but there was no-one. The town was completely empty.

Next, Fei-Hung slipped down to the lone jetty. The junk was still afloat. A couple of guards patrolled the deck, so he felt confident that the town wasn't permanently abandoned. The junk was being kept ready for use.

Fei-Hung slipped quietly aboard and put both guards down with rapid punches and kicks to the head. He tied them up quickly so that he could search the junk in peace. It was empty. No-one was aboard except for the guards, and Fei-hung left them bound and gagged when he left. They would be able to talk to his father and the others when they arrived.

The old monastery was his ultimate destination. This was where Vicki had said she and Barbara were held prisoner. Fei-Hung's confidence about finding Barbara was fading. He had found the place easily enough, but the absence of people

suggested she might already have been killed or removed. He began to hope that he would find nothing, and therefore that she had been taken away somewhere else. He didn't want to find her body lying alone in the abandoned building.

The main doors of the monastery were ajar, and Fei-Hung didn't touch them as he squeezed past in case they squeaked and alerted anyone within. A short corridor led him to the main hall. There was a dais and a few stools, but no statue of the Buddha, no incense burners, no religious paraphernalia of any kind. Fei-Hung didn't like it at all. Whoever had removed all this had turned a sacred space into just a space.

He looked for a door that would lead deeper into the monastery. It would probably be behind the dais, he thought. He spotted it quickly and pulled it open.

Two men blocked his path. One was lean and carried a staff. He matched the description of the one Ian had seen, called Gao. The other, whom Vicki had called Zhao, was like an ox standing on its hind legs. On any other day Fei-Hung might have been afraid as well as wary, but not today. Today he was simply relieved, because they were indeed men and not whatever that thing near the temple had been.

Gao lunged forward with the staff while Zhao circled round to stop Fei-Hung from getting away. Fei-Hung was happy enough with that; if the pair were wrong about what he wanted to do, their tactics might also be wrong.

He dodged back from the whirling staff, pretending not to notice Zhao closing in behind him. When the muscular general was close enough, and about to attack, Fei-Hung hit him in the gut with a tiger-tail kick, without looking round.

Zhao doubled over and toppled, but Gao redoubled his attack. Fei-Hung blocked as best he could, careful to block against the man's forearms rather than the wood itself. If he could stay in close enough, Gao wouldn't be able to swing the staff well enough to use it with enough momentum to do real damage.

Then Gao unexpectedly swung the staff down, sweeping Fei-Hung off his feet. Fei-Hung rolled immediately, narrowly

getting out from under the edge of Zhao's foot as it slashed towards his neck.

He sprang back to his feet to engage the unarmed Zhao again, keeping the man-mountain between himself and Gao. Fei-Hung was faster with his kicks and punches, but Zhao's muscles were like iron. All Fei-Hung's punches rebounded from Zhao's forearms, all his kicks from the outsides of Zhao's calves. Suddenly the tip of Gao's staff was jabbing past either side of Zhao's head, and Fei-Hung had to dart his head aside like a pigeon to avoid it.

He needed a breathing space to assess his strategy and acquire a useful weapon. He stunned Zhao with one of his father's speciality no-shadow kicks, then push-kicked him back into Gao. Both men tumbled in a heap crushing the black wooden throne.

Fei-Hung used the rebound from the kick to flip backwards, and snatched an umbrella from a stand near the door. He would have preferred a proper sabre or broadsword, but the main shaft of the umbrella felt as solid in his hand as any staff would.

His breath burnt his lungs, but he was excited by this rather than pained. He felt he had the measure of the two generals and, while he respected their skill and refused to feel comfortable enough to underestimate them, he was satisfied they did not outclass him. All that mattered was that he did his best. Live or die, he would be doing his best for his friends, his country and his beliefs.

Zhao and Gao were back on their feet and advancing on him from either side. Gao twirled his staff ominously, while Zhao held a leg from the broken throne in each hand in a double guarding block.

Fei-Hung didn't smile, but he relaxed and let his expression clear. Let the enemy wonder whether he was angry or afraid, excited or overconfident. Let them not know who their enemy was.

He was Wong Fei-Hung: healer, teacher and defender of the people he cared about, whether he knew them or not, and whether they were Han or not. Zhao and Gao were warriors

who sought to elevate one man above all others. It didn't matter whether they were crazy men or possessed by ghosts, because either way they were servants of oppression who valued force over thought. That was all they were, and it was all he needed to know.

Fei-Hung rolled the umbrella shaft around his wrist, testing its weight and balance. It didn't move the same way a sword would, but he knew he could adjust for that. He twisted the shaft in his hand, resting it on his left arm which was outstretched behind him. With his right hand, he smoothed down the front of his rumpled tunic and beckoned his opponents towards him.

They rushed him together. Fei-Hung bounded forward a couple of steps and leapt into the air between them. One foot hit the middle of Gao's staff as if it was a ladder rung, and prevented him from swinging the weapon. The other caught Zhao's shoulder, making him stagger aside.

Then Fei-Hung was on the balls of his feet, blocking and parrying Gao's staff with the umbrella. The umbrella jarred painfully against the heel of his hand with each block, but it didn't break.

Then Zhao was upon him as well, and Fei-Hung found himself blocking the staff with side kicks to Gao's hands and fencing against the two impromptu batons Zhao was trying to drum on his head with. The trio danced around the room like this for a moment, each seeking an advantage, until Fei-Hung managed to hook the staff with the umbrella shaft and slam it into Zhao's fists.

Before either general could recover, Fei-Hung stabbed backwards for Gao's groin with the point of the umbrella and snapped a no-shadow kick at Zhao's face. Both generals staggered back, allowing Fei-Hung to slip a toe under the fallen staff and flick it up into his hand.

He twirled the staff, thrusting it forward and back, aiming for the chests, groins and faces of both opponents. Their arms swung and shifted rapidly, blocking the attempted blows. Zhao managed to catch the end of the staff in a cross block, then lashed out with a foot and snapped it in half in

the middle. He immediately lunged forward with the half he now held, fencing with Fei-Hung who still held the other half.

Fei-Hung circled desperately, trying to keep Zhao between himself and Gao so that the leaner man couldn't flank him and attack. Finally, he saw an opportunity as Zhao lunged with his half of the staff at his stomach. A strong enough impact could rupture the younger man's spleen and kill him. At the last second Fei-Hung switched the piece of staff to his left hand, turned it behind the arm and launched his right foot on a roundhouse kick towards the inside of Zhao's elbow.

Zhao's right arm snapped and crumpled inwards, the piece of staff falling to the floor with a clatter. Not yet certain that Zhao was quite out of the fight, Fei-Hung let the momentum of his movement carry him round into a spin, and hit him on the side of the head with another tiger-tail kick from his left foot.

Zhao toppled sideways revealing the other man, who looked from Fei-Hung to the fallen man. 'Brother!' Gao cried.

Something in his tone told Fei-Hung he meant the word in its literal sense. Fei-Hung almost gave up then, because he knew that if it was a matter of family honour a brother would always seek to avenge a brother. Defeating one would merely redouble the efforts of the other.

Gao didn't return to the attack. Instead a startling, almost blinding, light blazed from his eyes and he thrust out his left hand. Fei-Hung didn't know what this meant, but he knew it was bad for him so he dived and rolled, just in time to avoid a bolt of lightning that shattered the air and ignited a small wooden stool against the wall.

Fei-Hung snatched the stool up by the end of one leg and threw it at Gao before he could do whatever it was again. Fei-Hung didn't understand what had just happened, and knew this meant it was time to get out if he could. His father had taught him that there was no shame in knowing when to withdraw.

Zhao was blocking the door, the same light beaming out from his eyes and from his grin, his left hand rising. Fei-

Hung turned, too terrified to think, and found Gao advancing on him. Gao held a sword in one hand and was using the other to pat out a flame on his shoulder.

The hairs on Fei-Hung's arms and neck prickled and he dropped, sliding feet-first to kick out at Gao's kneecaps. Gao fell forward and, in the instant that he was separated from Fei-Hung by only a few inches of air, took Zhao's lightning bolt in the face.

Instead of landing atop Fei-Hung, Gao was blasted clear across the room, where he slammed into the wall with enough force to splinter the boards. Fei-Hung had never heard a scream like his in his life before, and fervently hoped he never would again. It was a sound he knew he would hear in his sleep every night for the rest of his life, if he had one.

Fei-Hung instinctively grabbed the sword Gao had dropped, but realised that the steel would only attract the lightning if there was another bolt. Zhao had moved out of position, so Fei-Hung made a dash for the door. He burst into the fresh air just as there was a snapping bang behind him.

Zhao followed him out and another lightning bolt hit the ground under Fei-Hung. The blast knocked the running youth off his feet. Fei-Hung wasn't injured, and he rolled and even managed to keep hold of the sword. He got on to his knees as Zhao paused by a small tree.

Zhao stretched out his hand again and Fei-Hung hurled the sword with all his might. It took Zhao through the palm, pinning him to the tree at the instant the lightning snapped into being around his fingers. His fingers and thumb simply burst. Jagged light ripped out from his body, emerging like sweat from a condemned prisoner. His scream put Gao's out of Fei-Hung's mind for ever more.

Then the blinding serpents of light slithered away into the ground and under the rocks where such wriggling things belonged - and Zhao crumpled, leaving half his hand pinned to the tree.

Fei-Hung caught his breath and all his desire to keep standing fled from his body. He slumped to his knees, too

exhausted to keep in the sobs that his pounding heart and head were letting out. He didn't feel scared or sad, but he had to let his sobs out like steam from a train's engine. If he didn't, he thought he'd explode just like an overheated boiler.

Fei-Hung couldn't believe his eyes. Through the still-open door, he saw Gao rising to his feet, quivering and shaking with either trauma or rage. Fei-Hung couldn't tell which, and didn't care because the mere fact of his being upright was horrible enough.

Gao's hair was smouldering, his lips torn to bloody flaps by shards of exploded teeth and his nose was all but gone. All this was bad enough, but it was his eyes that struck Fei-Hung the most.

They were gone. They had burst and their contents had boiled away in a literal flash. Through the blasted sockets Fei Hung could see the incandescent sun that was contained by Gao's skull.

Gao turned away and slashed his hand through the air. A rent opened up, edged in lightning. To Fei-Hung's astonishment he could see another place through the tear. A hill with tents and buildings clustered around it. Then Gao stepped through the hole and it closed up with a bang.

4

The Doctor and his friends, and Kei-Ying, Three-Legged Tham, Beggar Soh and Iron Bridge Three arrived some hours later. The Tigers had brought men from the militia's Fifth Regiment to restore order to the deserted town.

Fei-Hung had managed to drag Zhao into the monastery, and had laid him on the dais in the main hall.

The muscular man was pale and covered in a layer of damp sweat. He was shaking and the sounds that made a tortuous escape from his throat could have been either tears, laughter or some bizarre, bastard offspring of the two.

'He's gone into shock,' Kei-Ying said, as the Doctor and Fei-Hung wrapped blankets around Zhao.

At the sound of his voice Zhao's eyes opened wide. They darted around searching for something. 'What happened?' he asked in a quivering voice. 'Did the bandits get away from the cave?'

The Doctor, Ian, Vicki, Kei-Ying and Fei-Hung exchanged glances.

'Bandits?' Fei-Hung echoed.

'What cave?' Vicki asked.

'Now, now,' the Doctor said thoughtfully, 'this poor devil has been through rather a lot lately, and we shouldn't rush him.'

'Devil is right,' Fei-Hung said. 'He shot fire from his hand, and -'

'Undoubtedly some kind of advanced weapon,' the Doctor snapped. 'Just because something relies on the projection of energy rather than pieces of metal -'

'There was no weapon, Doctor,' Fei-Hung insisted. 'He held out his hand like this..., ' he mimed the action, '...and lightning struck from it.'

The Doctor's expression darkened and his eyes narrowed, seeing explanations that no-one else in the room could see. 'I see, yes.' He turned back to the injured man. 'And what do you have to say for yourself, young man?' he demanded sharply.

'I don't understand,' the defeated general answered through teeth that were gritted against obvious pain. 'I was in a cave. We had chased some bandits who robbed a caravan. They went into a cave, and we followed. We fought them, and then...' His expression went blank. 'Then I woke up here, and my hand is gone.' He swallowed, looking at the bandaged stump of his arm as if he could will his hand back. 'Did one of the bandits do this?'

'No, they did not, General Zhao,' Fei-Hung said. 'I did that.'

'General?' the man said, wonderingly. 'I am no general, I am a monk. My name is Yeung.'

Everyone in the room started to talk at once, but the Doctor raised a hand to quieten them. 'Hush now! A monk,

you say, hmm? Tell me,' he continued slowly, 'did anything strange happen in this cave? Anything unusual?'

'There was a sort of light,' Brother Yeung admitted. 'Like the reflection of the sun on water if you throw a stone into a pool.'

'And what happened then?'

'I woke up here.'

'Yes... I'm afraid I, eh, rather thought that might be the case.' The Doctor stood up. 'I wonder, would this monastery have an infirmary of some kind?'

'They usually do,' Kei-Ying said. He lifted a large bag, not unlike a carpetbag. 'And I have some useful ingredients here.' He started pulling out jars and bottles, arranging them on the dais.

Fei-Hung walked around the dais as if looking for a clue to the monk's state of mind. 'He can't remember anything. I'm not really surprised - if he was possessed, the mind controlling his body would not be his own. Any memories would have been drained away with it.'

'Not necessarily,' the Doctor said. He steepled his fingers and regarded the wounded monk. 'This unfortunate man might still have some secondary memories of who - or rather, I should say, what - his strange handler may have been. Or what its aims and objectives were. The trick, I think, will be to find a way to get at and access them.'

'Secondary memories?' Ian echoed.

'Well, if you read a book you remember the story, even when the book is taken away from you.'

Ian nodded, understanding at once. 'You mean he won't remember being that person, but he might remember hearing it think or something.'

'Yes, dear boy, I should think there's a rather good chance of something like that.'

The Doctor stepped over to Kei-Ying's vast array of herbs and ointments that nestled like pigeons in little square nests.

'But if he doesn't know himself, at least consciously -'

The Doctor silenced Ian with a hawkish gaze. 'Then we shall just have to inquire of his subconscious, shan't we? Hmm?'

He started to lift jars and bottles from the dais, and examine their dusty labels. A couple he put down on a plinth and the rest he put back, his hands darting in and out of the growing field of vials like birds hunting for that early worm. 'Yes,' he chuckled to himself, 'the subconscious indeed.'

Kei-Ying looked at the jars and bottles the Doctor was collecting. He frowned for an instant but the frown cleared - Ian was impressed by how quickly - and he nodded with both understanding and approval. He didn't say what it was he understood, so Ian was left none the wiser. Instead Kei-Ying simply began measuring out tiny amounts of the contents of the vials and mixing them.

Ian was fascinated by how carefully he did this; the slowness and care with which he worked seemed as ritualistic and reverent as it was methodical.

Kei-Ying looked at him and Ian got the uncomfortable feeling that the Chinese doctor knew exactly what he was thinking.

'If a man paints a picture,' Kei-Ying said conversationally, 'the brush strokes are unique, for the precise moment of each one with exactly that amount of paint on exactly the fibres of that piece of silk will never come again. That picture is part of who he is - a frozen moment in a man's life.'

'I suppose,' Ian admitted, though he had no idea where Kei-Ying was going with this.

'A herbal mixture made by a healer is the same. This draught will be unique, because these exact seeds will never be in my hand at this exact date again. I must take great care over it because it is part of me, part of my work, and I am a careful man who gives thought to such things.'

'I'm not sure I understand.'

'Ah, that is the first step in understanding. Who and what we are,' Kei-Ying said, 'is not just this flesh that contains our thoughts or even those thoughts themselves. It is everything we do, everything that is perceptible to ourselves or others.'

‘You mean context is part of who we are?’

Kei-Ying smiled and set the draught down, completed. ‘Have you ever watched a child fly a kite with a ribbon trailing from it, looping and turning through the sky?’

‘Watched it?’ Ian chuckled. ‘I’ve flown many a kite in my youth.’

‘Then imagine that you could, at one moment, see that ribbon at every point in the flight simultaneously. A twisting, complex tube that takes up perhaps miles of sky. You can also see the air that supports the kite, the wind’s currents that brush against it as it brushes against the wind... Now imagine all of that is you. Not just your lifetime, but the real, whole you, affected by everything you affect. But the body and mind that you live in, that stands there listening to me tell you this, is only the ribbon as you see it normally.’

The wording was strange, and not very scientific, but Ian thought he knew what Kei-Ying meant. It was a sort of holistic view, he felt. He looked for the Doctor’s reaction, and saw that the old man was wearing a secret smile and the expression of someone who has just found a momentary wonder while passing through a rainbow.

Kei-Ying indicated the finished draught. ‘This is one of those unnoticeable and innumerable breaths of wind that have touched the ribbon that is me. Knowing this, I must create and treat it as carefully as I would any other part of myself.’ He held the draught to the monk’s lips, letting him sip at it.

Once the monk had drunk the draught, the Doctor waved his hand in front of the man’s eyes. The old Roman ring on the Doctor’s finger caught the light strangely. ‘Now, I am going to count backwards from five. When I reach one you will be asleep, but you will hear my voice and be able to answer me. Now. Five... four...’

Brother Yeung’s features relaxed, his eyes glazing over.

‘Three,’ the Doctor continued, ‘two... one.’ He stopped moving his hand. ‘Someone or something was with you for the last two years. It was inside you, but you heard it speak

and heard others speak to it. You saw what it did and you know what it wanted.'

'Yes.'

'Who was it?'

'General Zhao.'

'And who is this General Zhao?'

'Loyal general to the emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi. He is in Abbot Wu.'

The Doctor frowned. 'In?'

'Zhao's memory was preserved. It took me over, came into my head. He is immortal.'

'Immortality,' the Doctor said to himself, as if trying the concept on for size. 'Tell me, Chesterton, if you were in charge of something - a country, or even a large organisation - and wanted to be sure that your plans for it were carried out for ever more, even after your time, what would you do?'

'Look, Doctor, I like a good mental challenge as much as the next man, but surely this isn't the time to be -'

'This is exactly the time! And I know it may not seem like it to you, but I am certain that this is a vital key to rescuing Barbara. To outfox our opponent we must understand him.'

'Well... I suppose I'd leave instructions - notes and memoranda.'

'Yes. A good start, but notes and memoranda can be forged, can't they? You want to be absolutely certain that your orders remain for ever, to be obeyed by those who follow you. Indeed, perhaps you even want to make them believe you are still there giving them!'

'I could record my orders on a tape, I suppose.' The thought took hold, leading Ian to expound further as ideas and thoughts often did. 'Yes, I could make tapes with my policies and orders. Have them played over intercoms, or even down the phone to subordinates, who might think it was the real me.'

'Exactly! Now you have it. You could make a recording, which would give out the orders you wanted even if you were no longer there. So long, that is, as there was someone around to play the recording.'

‘But, Doctor, I’m from the 1960s, so it’s easy enough to find a tape recorder. But this is the middle of the nineteenth century.’

‘Yes, and I happen to believe that this particular recording was made for earlier still.’

‘At the time of the First Emperor?’

‘Yes, two thousand years ago.’

‘But, Doctor, you know that’s impossible. They didn’t have tape recorders in those days.’

Before the Doctor could answer, Ian corrected himself. ‘But you mentioned a sort of recording before, to Barbara. A “stone tape” you called it. Are you trying to suggest that this General Zhao is one?’

‘Yes, my boy, that is exactly what I am suggesting.’ The Doctor nodded towards Brother Yeung. ‘His story is quite clear cut, isn’t it? Qin Shi Huangdi wanted to rule for ever, and somehow he found a way to have his mind and personality recorded as a stone tape, along with those of his two generals.’

‘Then he found his immortality, after a fashion? It doesn’t sound like much of an afterlife to me.’

‘No, he didn’t really. This recording is only a copy of his mind at the time, but it is no more really him than a recording of a man singing a song is that original man.’

‘It sounds like a pretty unstable mind, too.’

‘It most certainly was. Unstable and dangerous. In those days the Chinese believed that eating imperishable materials such as gold and jade would make the body equally imperishable. So Qin liked to snack on powdered jade and gold dust.’

‘But that’s ridiculous. It could only lead to heavy-metal poisoning. And if gold affects the body anything like lead or arsenic...’

‘It does.’

‘Brain damage, eh?’ Ian asked, though he didn’t need the Doctor to answer this for him.

‘I’m afraid I was thinking too narrowly, Chesterton, when I speculated about a stone tape.’

‘Too narrowly? It sounded pretty broad-minded to me.’

‘Yes, but a recording doesn’t respond to you, does it? It just plays.’

‘An AI could respond to what you do,’ Vicki said. ‘An artificial intelligence,’ she added, this time for Ian’s benefit.

‘Artificial intelligence?’

‘AIs are sort of like recordings in computers, but they can think for themselves and hold conversations, fight against you in games... What they do or say depends on what you do or say.’

‘My dear child! You’ve hit the nail precisely on the head.’ The Doctor chuckled. ‘That’s exactly what you’ve done.’

‘You’ve both lost me,’ Ian admitted. ‘The stone tape thing I can understand, but...’

The Doctor tapped his foot for attention. ‘If you could make a stone tape - a recording or imprint, rather, of a person’s mind - then you could play it back. Perhaps you could record over it later, wiping it out. But what if you wanted to keep it but change it a little, hmm? What if you could program it to do some things the way you want them done?’

Vicki frowned. ‘Then it wouldn’t be so much a stone tape as a stone application or a stone executable file. A building full of them could be a stone matrix. But how could you program it or edit it?’

‘That would depend on where you are in relation to your stone application.’

Ian was still trying to understand all this futuristic terminology. ‘So what you’re saying is that some intelligence persuaded the First Emperor to imprint his and his men’s consciousness into a stone tape recording, which this controlling force could then reprogram to do its bidding?’

‘Yes, Chesterton, that is precisely what I am stating.’

‘Then who or what is behind this?’

‘Some alien force that has no physical presence, but is capable of making use of the forces inherent in the fabric of the universe to reach out and program local proxies on worlds it wishes to control.’

‘What forces inherent in the fabric of the universe?’

‘Alignments in gravitational fields, perhaps. Much as you might wait for the wind to drop before shouting from one roof top to another, the alignments and conjunctions of stars and planets allow some beings to make their influence felt at certain times.’

‘And that’s why they waited two thousand years before starting up their reprogrammed army? Because they needed the conditions to be right in order for them to be heard?’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor said darkly. ‘The stars must be right.’

5

Ian stood in the store room where Vicki had said she and Barbara were held prisoner. He told himself he was looking for signs of what had happened to Barbara - blood, if the worst had come to the worst. In reality he was doing his best not to look at all. He didn’t want to see blood, or a body, or anything other than her smiling when she saw him.

The fact that the abbot, whether possessed or otherwise, had taken her with him suggested there was still a window in which Ian was expected to kill Major Chesterton.

He had never thought he could do something like that. Not in cold blood. He had killed during his time travelling with the Doctor and Barbara, but he had never set out with that intention, and never done so when losing his own life wasn’t the only alternative. Cold-blooded killing was a different matter entirely.

Taking a life for selfish reasons was possibly the worst thing Ian could imagine. At Sunday School he had been taught the Ten Commandments and, although he wasn’t particularly religious as an adult, he still tried to hold on to those core values which seemed common to almost all races and cultures.

He had also been taught that suicide was a sin as bad as murder, because you were murdering yourself. He doubted that Father Michael ever could have imagined a situation in which this could be so literally the case.

Was it murder to kill an older version of yourself when you would still be alive? Was it suicide? Or was it some weird mixture of both and neither? Ian didn't know, but he was sure Father Michael would have disapproved.

Father Michael by definition wouldn't have had a wife to live for, kill for and die for. Barbara might not share his name or wear his ring, but he knew their hearts had wed long ago and were just waiting for their minds to catch up.

Would he kill for Barbara? Yes, to protect her life. He would die for her too, he knew that. Major Chesterton was himself, which meant that he, too, would die for Barbara. Ian just wished he didn't have to be the one to make the choice for him. Not that anyone else could. They were one person, and only one person could make such a choice.

Ian backed out of the store room and found his way out of the monastery. The moon was setting in the west. Not on the British Empire - the sun would set on that in the coming century - but the ancient Greek huntress was setting on one man who was two.

Sticking to the shadows, as if in a dream, Ian set off for the docks.

Vicki woke early and went to look for breakfast. A boat from Xamian had been promised, bearing supplies. She hoped it had arrived. She passed the room Ian had been given at the monastery and saw that it was empty, the door open.

Vicki wasn't surprised at this. With Barbara in the hands of a madman - or worse - it would be a wonder if Ian could get a wink of sleep. He was probably already at breakfast, swapping stories with the soldiers who were delivering the supplies.

He wasn't. In fact, he wasn't anywhere in the monastery. Vicki was beginning to worry that some of their enemies had remained behind as guerrillas or terrorists. She half expected a sword-wielding assassin with glowing eyes to jump out at her at any moment. The only person she did bump into, however, was Fei-Hung. He was going through his morning

jiao shi next to a scorched and blackened tree as the sun rose.

‘Have you seen Ian?’ she asked.

‘No, but I am worried about him.’

‘He seems fine to me,’ Vicki said. ‘All his injuries have healed.’

Fei-Hung shook his head. ‘He has a mix of practicality, compassion and courage that is enviable and dangerous. He reminds me of myself, in many ways.’

‘You mean he won’t leave anyone behind? He doesn’t want to fight, but he won’t back down if he’s forced...?’

Fei-Hung nodded.

‘Also... if I were him I would do anything to rescue the woman I love. Even if it meant dying or killing. And, I think that if he were me he would do the same thing.’

A terrible suspicion began to dawn on Vicki. ‘You mean...?’

‘I mean he isn’t in his room, no-one has seen him since before sunrise and the boat that delivered the supplies from Xamian has already left. I don’t know whether he was on it, but if I were him I would be oh my way to kill the major.’

‘Oh no!’ Vicki ran back into the monastery. She had to tell the Doctor about this, and she was sure he would come to the same conclusion as Fei-Hung. It was a conclusion Vicki didn’t want to believe, but did.

The Doctor was examining scorch marks on the wall of the main hall, while Logan, who had arrived with the food supplies and bedding, looked on.

‘Gunshots?’ Logan asked.

‘No, I think some kind of projected electrical plasma.’

‘I’ve never heard of such a weapon.’

‘If young Wong is to be believed, there was no weapon. And, as it happens, I do believe him.’

‘But then how - ?’

Before the Doctor could answer, Vicki called out to him.

‘Doctor!’

‘What is it, child? Can’t you see I’m busy?’

‘It’s about Ian. He’s gone. I think he’s gone to kill the other Ian. I mean, Major Chesterton.’

The Doctor gasped. 'He mustn't. If the two Ians should meet, there would be the most terrible explo-'

'Ian?' Logan shook his head. 'The major's name isn't Ian.'

The Doctor and Vicki both froze. 'What did you say?' the Doctor asked hoarsely.

'The major's name isn't Ian. It's William. Major William Chesterton, of the First Light Hussars.'

'Are you certain of that?'

'As certain as I can be, and I've known him since he was twenty and under my father's command.'

'Captain, we must get to Xamian Island at once.'

'The boat will have gone back already.'

'Then we must use the junk. Or Ian Chesterton will make a terrible, terrible mistake!'

Ian walked on to the parade ground in the heart of the fortress at Xamian. He didn't feel his footsteps hit the ground, and felt as if he was floating. All a product of adrenaline or something, he supposed.

A couple of soldiers in grey shirts, sans uniform tunics, were whitewashing the perimeter of small stones around the parade ground. Ian suppressed a smile. In... what?... ninety years? ...he'd be doing the exact same thing in Wales. What was it the French said? The more things changed, the more they stayed the same. Technologies, policies and attitudes may change, he thought, but the British army would for ever run on the motto, 'If it moves, shoot it; if it doesn't move, paint it white.'

He wondered if these men were conscripts, as he had been in his National Service days, or volunteers. For all Ian knew they still press-ganged people in 1865. He reflected that his knowledge of army history wasn't up to much. He should ask Barbara, he thought, and then shivered.

'Major Chesterton,' a voice called. Ian froze, struck with the fear that his other self was about to stumble upon him. True, he wanted to meet the major, but on his own terms. He wanted to see him coming.

The call came again and Ian looked around for the source. A soldier was coming across the parade ground holding a bundle. 'Excuse me, sir,' the man said with a salute. 'Sorry, sir! Didn't recognise you without your moustache, sir.'

'That's all right,' Ian told the man. 'Life is all about change, isn't it?' He forced a smile he didn't feel. 'What can I do for you, Private?'

'Oh, sorry again, sir. For the delay, I mean.'

He held out the bundle he was carrying. Ian took it, and found that it was heavy. It was a leather belt, wrapped around a leather holster that contained a pistol that weighed almost as much as Ian's heart.

'Quartermaster says it's as good as new, sir.'

Ian forced something he hoped resembled a smile. 'Of course he does. Thank you, Private. Dismissed.'

The soldier left just in time, as Major Chesterton emerged from a door twenty yards behind him.

The pistol felt heavy in Ian's hands as he walked towards his other self. He registered that people were looking at him, and speaking or shouting. They were like reflections in a fairground hall of mirrors - distorted and silent, fading out of his peripheral vision as he came closer to the major.

There was sound - voices, in the main - but it floated past him like the breeze. His older self, turning, surprised, as Ian raised the gun.

Their eyes locked and Ian saw understanding there of what was about to pass between them. He knew he shouldn't be surprised as his older self must surely have remembered this moment when it had been he who pulled the trigger.

Where was Barbara in Major Chesterton's life? Had they parted, amicably or otherwise? Had Ian's older self become separated from the others and left behind? Was an older Barbara still travelling through time and space, yearning to return to where the Ship had left him?

Or had Gao not kept his word to release her? Would she follow his older self into death today, killed by a captor who had no further use for her?

Not knowing the answers to any of these questions, Ian fired once, then again and again. Major Chesterton crumpled, his ankle turning under him, and crashed to the ground.

CHAPTER SIX

Last Hero in China

I

It was like stepping through a doorway. One moment they had been in the terraced garden outside the old monastery, and suddenly Barbara and Qin were standing on a dark, rain-soaked hillside, overlooking a vast temporary camp that would have put the preparations for D-Day to shame.

A city of yurts and tents was spread across broad, dusty fields on every side. Wooden cabins and huts clustered around the base of the hill. Some had simple iron chimneys burping out foul, black smoke. The doom-laden thump of mechanical workings rolled up the hill towards them.

Guards were patrolling everywhere, and troops were drilling in the open spaces left between the blocks of tents. Civilians were hard at work, fetching and carrying. Some wore the robes of monks, and Barbara fancied that she now knew what had happened to the population of the town she had been in previously.

The hill itself seemed to be square, with relatively straight sides rising to the summit. It was more like a squat pyramid, Barbara thought, than a natural hill. It squatted against the fields like a limpet or barnacle on a ship's hull, parasitically holding on to the land.

Then Barbara felt a pressure behind her ears, and the world around her disappeared again.

She woke up retching, with no idea how much time had passed. She was in a small, stone room. There were no windows, but the door was open and led out into a stone corridor. An oil lamp just outside the door cast a dim, honeyed light into the room. There was very little dust and the air was thick and heavy, having been trapped for a length

of time that Barbara could only guess at, but which she suspected would be measured in centuries.

The abbot, or Qin, was watching her as she got groggily to her feet. 'Welcome back, woman,' he said. He didn't seem angry any more.

'Where are we?'

'In my mausoleum.'

There were painted friezes on the walls depicting hunting scenes, parades and caravans travelling through mushroom-shaped mountains. At the centre of every scene was a large man who carried a paunch ahead of him like a prow. He was wearing quilted robes and a sort of wide cummerbund. On his head was a kind of mortarboard with a row of tassels at the front and back. He might almost be a comical figure, Barbara thought, except for the face.

It was a face that could adorn the posters in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or give Stalin nightmares. Fierce, burning eyes looked out from a proud snarl and a Rasputinesque beard. It was the face of a man who knew he had the power of life and death over everyone he could ever meet, and could not imagine living any other way.

Barbara's gaze followed the abbot's as he noticed the friezes. He reached out a hand to touch the painted face, and put the other to his own cheek.

'This is...'

'You, I suppose,' Barbara said. 'Qin Shi Huangdi.'

'So you accept the truth? That is good. I may yet let you live.'

He seemed to be struggling with the words, and she got the feeling he was trying to justify something to himself.

'In any case, your friend Ian did what he was told. Gao reports that he shot Major Chesterton, and so nipped in the bud any coalition to move against me. He will be hanged, of course. He is now a murderer, after all.'

'I don't believe it! Ian wouldn't harm anyone!'

'Would you harm someone to save the life of someone you loved?'

She didn't answer. She didn't have to.

‘So would he. And I have kept my word and spared your life.’

‘Why?’ She didn’t know much about the First Emperor, but she knew he was supposed to be vengeful and sadistic. ‘Why keep me alive instead of killing me?’

He turned away, refusing to meet her eyes, and she realised the truth.

‘I said maybe you were out-possessed...’ She tried to meet his eyes, but he avoided her. ‘You can’t kill me, can you? That other creature, the one that’s inside you, has other plans, and it won’t let you kill me!’

‘Nonsense!’ He slapped her. ‘I do as I please.’

He dragged her out into the corridor. Oil lamps were burning at regular intervals, and the darkness above them had a weight that made Barbara uncomfortable. She wondered if there was a whole mountain over her head, threatening to crash down on her at any moment. Set into the wall at the end of the corridor was a plain, undecorated slab. A ramp of desiccated skeletons climbed halfway up it, their twig-like fingers reaching out for the freedom that was separated from them by the stone.

Leathery skin was shrink-wrapped around their bones, bearded with patches of fungus that had dried to dust centuries ago. They looked as if they had simply grown older and more decrepit with the passing of centuries, and had eventually forgotten to die and rot.

‘Who were they?’

Qin didn’t spare the skeletons a glance. ‘Labourers, masons, painters. People who could not be trusted to keep what they had seen to themselves.’ He compared his own hand to one of those that had been mummified by the sealed-in air. ‘They were supposed to serve me in heaven, until my return.’ He dropped the hand he’d been holding and kicked its owner, who exploded into choking dust. ‘They didn’t.’

He passed by the ramp and led Barbara into a larger chamber.

Several sarcophagi lay in the darkness sealed with heavy, stone lids. Despite her fear, Barbara couldn’t resist looking at

the carvings on the sides. This was an opportunity that could never come again. She knew she was inside the tomb of the First Emperor, and she also knew it had never been discovered by archaeologists or historians. Not in her time, anyway.

The carvings on the sarcophagi showed loving, romantic scenes of courting, and couples holding hands.

‘Your wives... or mistresses?’

‘Concubines,’ Qin said. He stroked the top of the nearest sarcophagus. ‘I had forgotten these...’

He stopped to look at the sarcophagus and his hands moved towards its lid as if he wanted to remove it. His hands fell, and Barbara was relieved. All that could be inside - hopefully - would be another desiccated mummy, or an ivory skeleton, or simply a layer of dust. None of these would be the best way to remember a wife or lover. If it was her, she decided, she would rather not see what was inside, and remember her lover as he had been the last time they made love.

‘The ones who didn’t bear me sons,’ he muttered. ‘Strangled.’

Barbara’s pang of sympathy for him died quickly; more quickly than the poor women in the sarcophagi had. ‘That was their punishment, was it?’ she demanded, putting every particle of disgust that she could into her voice.

‘Punishment? No!’ Qin caressed the top of the sarcophagus again. ‘A son is an heir and needs his mother. The others... I was to love them for ever, in heaven. They would spend eternity with the one who loved them more than anyone could.’ A shadow cloaked his features. ‘They didn’t. They will be courtesans in heaven, but I remain here, to look after my empire and its people.’

Sadness had replaced the earlier anger in his voice. He might be an alien, or a spirit possessing the living, or both, but Barbara knew he was desperately unstable.

‘If this is the tomb of Qin Shi Huangdi, it’s been lost for two thousand years.’

‘Not to me.’

‘What I mean is, these oil lamps are quite small. How come they’re still burning?’

‘We are not alone here. Four of my captains are on duty.’

As if called, a shadow appeared on the wall. It was massive and bulky, and Barbara realised it was one of the hooded figures who had abducted her and Vicki from Po Chi Lam.

The figure stepped into the light, and Barbara saw it clearly for the first time. She couldn’t believe her eyes. It was a phrase she had long thought a cliché, but now it was literally true and her mind tried to turn away from the image. It was repulsed, as a magnetic pole is repulsed by a like pole.

‘It’s impossible,’ she breathed, already feeling her voice lose control.

‘No, it isn’t. And soon you and all the *gwailos* in China will be seeing a lot more of them. A lot.’

Barbara finally screamed.

Ian Chesterton was slumped in the major’s office, a guard on duty outside. He didn’t know why they hadn’t put him in a cell, or even why they hadn’t simply hanged him once they had tackled him to the ground next to the major’s body. He didn’t particularly care, either. He was a murderer and if they hanged him for it, well, at least he had done his best for Barbara.

He noticed a photograph on the wall, and was momentarily surprised. He wasn’t sure when photography had been invented. The picture had a caption identifying the men as members of a Hussar company at Jaipur, five years ago.

Everyone wore old-fashioned uniforms with lots of braid and, after a moment, he recognised a face on the far left of the picture. It was the one he had looked into when he pulled the pistol’s trigger. The one he had seen in the mirror last time he shaved.

‘India, in 1860? So we don’t come here again,’ he muttered to himself. It was a strange feeling to know one’s future, he thought. The phrase ‘someone walking over my grave’ just didn’t do it justice. It was a feeling of awe at the complexity of fate, and fear at the knowledge of one’s own doom, and

comfort at there being even one certainty in life, all combined to create a heaviness in the veins and a sluggishness in the mind.

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry, or just keep praying that Barbara was, and would remain, alive and healthy.

'So,' a familiar voice said. 'You're the Chesterton I'd heard so much about.'

It was none other than Major Chesterton, alive and without so much as a bloodstain on his shirt. He was wiping some parade-ground dirt off his cheek.

'You're still alive?'

Chesterton nodded. 'I do so hope you're not offended. You got that gun from a private who thought you were me, didn't you?'

Ian nodded, dumbfounded. He didn't know whether to be delighted or horrified that things had gone so differently from the way he had intended. How would this affect Barbara's chances of survival? That was all that mattered. If someone had asked Ian to imagine this situation, he would have said he would want to find the kidnappers and make them pay. He was surprised, and felt helpless, to discover that he didn't give a fig about them. He just wanted to see Barbara once again, and hear her voice and know that she was all right.

'I'd have done the same,' Chesterton admitted.

Ian managed a thin, humourless smile. 'I know.'

'The gun was loaded with blanks. Not even much powder in them, in case you came too close. Just enough to make a noise.'

Chesterton sat down opposite Ian, and the pair spent a moment just looking at each other.

'I would die for Barbara,' Ian said. 'As a matter of fact I almost have, several times. You would too.'

'I daresay I would, if I'd ever met the lady in question.'

'You can't mean that,' Ian exclaimed. 'I... You don't even remember Barbara?'

'Keep your voice down, dammit,' the major hissed. He looked round as if expecting to see all his troops listening at

the door. 'I don't remember much of anything before this week,' he admitted. He fingered the bump on the back of his head, and wondered how much he could trust this man.

'I know I shouldn't tell anyone this, but I feel I can trust you. I wish I knew why.'

I could tell you, but I doubt you'd believe it,' Ian muttered.

'I took a fall from my horse. It did something to my memory. I love my life in the Hussars, Ian. I'd never want to do anything else, but if word got out that I'd gone doolally I'd be back to Blighty before you could say... anything, really.'

'But maybe the Doctor can help you recover our - your - memory.'

'The Doctor most certainly can,' came another voice from the door.

It was the Doctor, of course, and Ian almost leapt out of his chair in delight.

'You've been a complete idiot, Ches- Ian. Complete and total!' The Doctor wagged a finger at Ian as if he had been scrumping apples. 'If I hadn't got here first, you'd have been a murderer.'

Ian's mind reeled. 'But if you got here first, why didn't you say something? Why the charade with the gun and the blanks?'

'Because young Master Wong - Fei-Hung - spotted that man Gao watching, and we decided to put on a disinformative show for him and his master.'

Ian slumped, and started to shake as all the adrenaline and tension drained away. 'What about Barbara?'

'I know where that abbot fellow is. We shall be dealing with him next, once we've decided who is to be doing what.'

'We?'

'Myself, Master Wong, the other Tigers and the major. We shall have a sort of council of war within the hour. In fact, just as soon as Major Chesterton here collects the remedy Master Wong has been preparing for him to sort out this memory problem.'

He looked pointedly at the major, who shrugged submissively. 'I'll go now,' he said, and did so, leaving the Doctor and Ian alone.

'I'm rather afraid that the major there... well... He's not you,' the Doctor said more quietly. 'I was wrong, Chesterton, about your future impinging on your past.'

'You were wrong?' Ian wondered who the hell he had nearly killed.

'His name is Major William Chesterton.'

'Bill Chesterton? But that was my great-grandfather's name-'

'Exactly. And that is exactly who this man is.'

Ian shivered and his hands trembled. 'You mean I nearly...'

'Yes.'

What Ian said next, he would have been sacked for saying in front of his class at Coal Hill School.

2

The 'council of war' was taking place in the officers' mess. A circle of reasonably comfortable armchairs had been pulled around a large circular table stained with rings from years of mugs of tea and flacons of beer.

Kei-Ying, Three-Legged Tham, Beggar Soh and Iron Bridge Three were huddled together, speaking rapidly. Logan watched them suspiciously. The Doctor was using pint pots to hold down the corners of a map on the table.

The two Chestertons arrived together. The major was beginning to realise that this chap Ian wasn't so bad after all, though the resemblance between them was disturbing. He was unable to express his wonderment in mere words.

'Upon my soul... I never imagined such a likeness was possible. Who are you, exactly?'

'My name's Ian.'

'Yes, I heard that. Can't say I've heard of an Ian in the family.'

'I'm a rather distant relative, a couple of times removed.'

‘Ah.’ Now the major understood. ‘You must be one of Aunt Mary’s boys. Though you’ve done a good job of hiding the accent...’

‘Thanks,’ Ian said, then quickly changed the subject. ‘It looks like everyone’s ready for us.’

‘Yes.’ The major saw Logan salute, and returned the gesture. The captain looked as though he’d been through a nervous breakdown, though Chesterton couldn’t imagine why. Shocked by the security breach of Ian being able to wander into the garrison like that, he supposed.

Beggar Soh looked up from the other Tigers and rubbed his hands with glee. ‘Ah, there you are. As occupying powers go, you’re not really doing much with your vassal country, are you?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean you’ve got your own laws here in the city, as if the Chinese didn’t have good enough ones, and outside there seems to be no law at all.’

Ian’s attention drifted away from the conversation and he saw Fei-Hung sitting quietly behind his father. He realised he hadn’t been able to ask the young master what had happened when he went looking for Barbara at the monastery.

He slid around the edge of the circle and reached Fei-Hung. ‘Thank you,’ he said first, ‘for all you’ve done.’

‘It was the right thing to do.’

‘Yes, it was. I sometimes wish more people in the world had your attitude. Look, I wanted to ask you: when you went to look for Barbara at the monastery, you didn’t see her at all?’

Fei-Hung shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, Ian. Neither she nor the abbot, Qin, were there. They must have left before I arrived.’

‘Yes, but how?’

‘Perhaps the same way this “General Gao” left.’

This got the Doctor’s attention. ‘And how was that?’ he asked.

‘Magic.’

The Doctor glared at him over the top of his pince-nez. 'Nonsense, my boy.'

'I am no liar, Doctor. He waved his hand and cut a fiery hole in the air. I could see another place through it, and then he stepped through.'

'And the hole?'

'Closed up after him.'

The whole story sounded preposterous to Ian, but Fei-Hung seemed earnest enough, and had proved an honest and reliable witness so far. Ian also had to ask himself whether the story was really any stranger than a police box that could disappear, and travel anywhere in time and space.

'There are more things in heaven and earth,' he muttered to himself under his breath.

The Doctor didn't notice his comment. He simply tapped a forefinger on the map. 'We know where he's going, but that would give him a terrible advantage in speed...'

Kei-Ying had been listening to his son's conversation with one ear and to his fellow Tigers with the other. He caught the Doctor's eye, and both men looked from Ian to each other.

Kei-Ying drew the Doctor aside. 'You're worried about her too.'

The Doctor nodded. 'She is a friend, yes, as is Ian. I fear that to lose one of them would be to lose the other.'

'If you'll pardon my saying, Doctor-sifu, you look like one who has lost someone close already.'

'I was thinking about my granddaughter. She left me recently, you see.'

Kei-Ying nodded understandingly. 'She's back in England? In London?'

'Yes, yes, in a manner of speaking. She chose to stay behind.'

The Doctor's eyes became unfocused, as if he was looking at something - or someone - impossibly far away. He fell silent for a moment and Kei-Ying fancied he could feel something of what the Doctor must be feeling. Fei-Hung would set up his own school and surgery some day, gods

willing, and Kei-Ying could see himself wearing that expression when he did.

‘She just didn’t realise,’ the Doctor continued, ‘or perhaps I should say understand, that she had made that decision.’

‘Your granddaughter... Do you have sons, Doctor? Or daughters? Or both?’

The Doctor seemed surprised by the question. ‘Yes, hmm, I suppose you could put it that way. Sons or daughters, or both, yes.’

‘Then we must make sure this threat doesn’t last to threaten our sons or daughters.’

‘I quite agree. The conjunction I spoke of before will begin at the moment of totality as seen from Xi’an.’

‘And when will that be?’

‘At exactly eight minutes past midnight. And, whatever happens, we must be there to stop Qin - or whatever is behind him - from exploiting it.’

‘How?’

The Doctor didn’t answer. Kei-Ying searched his face, knowing in his gut the only answer the Doctor could have in mind. The Doctor’s eyes remained level and determined, indomitable.

‘What exactly is it that you’re expecting, Doctor? Men from Mars to land?’

‘Whatever our opponent is, it comes from much further away than Mars. The other end of the line of focus formed by the conjunction is millions of times further away.’

Iron Bridge Three sniffed slightly. ‘Yes, well obviously we have to worry about the troops as well as this conjunction thing.’

‘Troops?’

‘This man Qin, or whatever he’s calling himself, isn’t just relying on those two generals and help from the hells. No, he has a large number of living troops and we’ll have to deal with them.’

‘Won’t they be at Chang’an?’ Ian asked.

Almost everyone at the table shook their heads as one. The major answered. ‘What’s the point in taking towns and

villages if all his troops are already in one place? He must have left them scattered along the line from Chang'an to here.'

'But the town we found was abandoned.'

'Because it will have been taken by his own personal staff. They go where he goes. They'll be in Chang'an with him, but most of the Black Flag members and whatever other thugs he's persuaded - no offence to our guests - will be scattered around.'

'If we can stop him exploiting the conjunction,' the Doctor said, 'nothing will happen in those towns, and Qin's followers will simply drift away.'

'And if we can't, a civil war,' Kei-Ying said gloomily.

'I'm afraid so.'

'Then we must be prepared for both eventualities,' Chesterton said. 'We need forces to be ready at those places where we know there are Qin loyalists, and another group to go after Qin himself.'

'The men who follow him were formerly Black Flag members,' Kei-Ying said. 'I find it a vile idea to face Black Flag against Black Flag, but it is an internal Chinese matter and an internal Black Flag matter.' He looked around the table, a faint smile playing across his features. 'I suggest that the Tigers take militia troops on manoeuvres near the places where Qin has forces.'

'Agreed,' the Doctor said. 'In fact, the very suggestion I myself was about to make. Meanwhile, I shall go to find a way to prevent Qin's plans from succeeding, and to rescue my friend Barbara.'

'Me too,' Ian said.

'And me,' Vicki piped up.

Fei-Hung looked to his father, who nodded. 'We will go with you, Doctor.'

'So will I,' Major Chesterton said finally. 'Logan, I'll want a platoon of volunteers.'

Vicki, Ian and the Doctor remained in the officers' mess when the others dispersed.

'Doctor,' Ian asked, 'how exactly are we supposed to get to Chang'an? It's hundreds of miles away

'- and we must be there tonight, yes.' The Doctor's face was troubled, his tone tired.

Vicki was about to suggest that they fly, but held her tongue. She wasn't sure whether powered flight had been invented yet, and had already embarrassed herself enough by getting things wrong.

She caught Ian's eyes, and mimed an aeroplane movement with her hand, behind the Doctor's back. Ian smiled and shook his head, then mouthed '1903'.

'We can't exactly use the TARDIS,' Ian said aloud.

'No. I rather think we must use our enemy's own energies against it, just as I did with that ruffian Jiang.'

'But what energy?'

'Some kind of plasma-based helix. I suspect, you know, that the supernatural occurrences people have reported are signs of leakage or corruption from the energy that has already been sent to control Qin and his Generals.'

'Perhaps we can find a way to hijack it?' Vicki suggested. 'Sort of, hack into it or pirate it.'

Ian snapped his fingers. 'What about the monk? The one who was Zhao? Surely he had the same ability as the other one?'

'Yes, yes, of course, but he hasn't now, has he?'

'No, but could he have, if you accessed those - what did you call them - secondary memories?'

The Doctor brightened immediately. 'I really have no idea,' he admitted, 'but it must be worth trying!'

Outside the hill where Barbara and Qin had arrived earlier, exhausted civilians were preparing ramps up out of the earth, and carrying stacks of new swords and rifles to racks that filled long wooden cabins.

Gao, his eyeless sockets glowing, walked among the workers, his head swinging from side to side. The workers had done well, producing new weapons for the army that would soon be reborn.

A few minutes after Gao had passed, a ring of electricity pulled back from a point a few feet above the ground. Major Chesterton came through first, quickly followed by Logan, Ian, the Wongs, the Doctor, Vicki, and a platoon of armed men led by Anderson.

The fiery gateway closed behind them.

As soon as he saw the hill, the Doctor sucked air in through his teeth. 'That will be the receiving point for the energy. We must get inside. The main entrance seems to have been excavated, but it will be guarded.'

'We could use Cheng's cave,' Kei-Ying suggested. 'It must be in this hill, if this is where it all started.'

'That will be for you to do,' the Doctor said. 'I rather think it's time I met this Qin Shi Huangdi.'

'You can't be serious,' Ian protested. 'He'll kill you, or at least take you prisoner.'

'Yes, Chesterfield, he might. But sometimes we must face up to such dangers, mustn't we? Besides which I have a feeling that if he has kept Barbara alive to make her an offer, as Vicki told us, he might make me the same one.'

'He tried to have Jiang kill you.'

'Then I imagine it means these great celestial intelligences are not so infallible, hmm? You see there's always a bright side.' The cheerful smile froze on his face. 'Vicki, Chesterton, I've been such a foolish old goat!'

'No,' Vicki protested, 'that's impossible, and you know it.'

'I've been thinking - we all have - that this Qin of yours must have a military reason for coming south.'

'Well, he is a warlord, and he must be a successful one if he really was the emperor.'

'A military man would be looking for resources,' the Doctor explained, 'seeking to get things for himself and deny them to

the enemy. He would be looking for targets he could take and hold.'

'So?' Vicki asked.

'So Qin hasn't done that.'

'But he's taken dozens of places. Just look at the map.'

'That's just what I have done, child. Looked, really looked, at the map. And the places he has been taking are all old places. Places with ancient temples and geological faults. Places where energy could be distributed or stored in the rock, and in the buildings.'

'Stone tapes?' Vicki thought she could see where the Doctor's mind was going. 'Stone tapes, and energy being transmitted here via the conjunction...'

'Exactly. He hasn't been trying to take over China, he has been -'

'Formatting a disk!'

'Yes!'

'But he seemed pretty certain of what he wanted to do - reclaim the empire he used to have.'

'I believe you, child,' the Doctor said, patting her hair in a kindly way. 'And I think my mind is open on the matter of whether he believes it too. Or if he even knows why he is really doing what he's doing.'

'How could he not know?'

'Didn't you say that he harped on about gaps in his memory, and that he wasn't all there, if you'll pardon the expression?'

'Yes,' Vicki's hand darted to her mouth as she suddenly felt sick at the thought that had crossed her mind. 'You mean there's something else in those gaps?'

'Nature abhors a vacuum, young lady. Yes, I think perhaps there is.'

Vicki tried to imagine what it must be like, sharing a brain with an alien something that was there in place of part of your memories - in place of part of what made you you. Then she wished she hadn't.

'And that's what was in charge when that light was shining out of his eyes,' she said.

The Doctor nodded solemnly. 'In Qin, and in his generals.'

Ian had been thinking about this business of energy distribution as the time travellers and their companions made their way around the workings on the brooding hill. 'Doctor, you say they're trying to distribute energy around China, like a giant circuit.'

'In a way, yes, but to distribute such energies,' the Doctor said, 'the circuitry must be exactly right.'

'Can't we break the circuit somehow? Make it incapable of carrying this power?'

'We must try! The engineering of this structure is very precise - it would have to be, to do what it's doing. Perhaps if we could introduce some kind of imbalance...?'

'Doctor, you said that the materials of the place itself carry a charge - piezoelectricity. Could we break that? Introduce a new fault line, maybe?'

'With explosives? Yes, my boy, we could. We need only introduce a few cracks -'

'Can't be done,' Major Chesterton said. 'We don't have enough dynamite for that.'

'Just a minute,' Ian interrupted. 'We know from what Fei-Hung told us about the monk that this power is electrical in some way.'

'Yes, yes, don't waste our time stating the obvious.'

'I was just thinking, Doctor, that if it's electrical perhaps we can short it out to earth. There must be water around here somewhere.'

'Water?' The Doctor's face took on a calculating expression that would have done justice to Machiavelli or Sun Tzu.

Kei-Ying shook his head. 'Cheng said the whole complex is bone dry, Ian. There's not the slightest trace of dampness.'

'What's more,' the Doctor added, 'this place was built for the transposition of this energy. Whoever designed it was not a fool. They will have ensured that it's protected against anything that could short-circuit it.'

Ian nodded placatingly. 'I understand that, and I suppose it will be pretty well protected if the builders did their job right.'

The fact of there having been builders also guarantees that there must have been accessible water somewhere.'

'How so?'

Ian almost laughed. Despite all that threatened them, he found he could enjoy the sensation of seeing something the Doctor didn't. 'Well, they were men, weren't they? Ordinary human beings. Even if they were enslaved they would still have to have been fed and watered, wouldn't they? To say nothing of the complex itself needing a local water supply. So there must be wells in the vicinity.'

The Doctor looked at him, a smile spreading across his face. 'You're absolutely right, young man. There must have been.' He tapped Ian on the chest. 'You know, I think this must be why I enjoy the company of you young fellows. You're just the right people to see the simple solutions.'

'Thanks, I think.'

Kei-Ying still looked and sounded doubtful. 'Surely any sources of water will have been sealed off by now if there's a danger?'

'Whatever has been sealed can always be unsealed, especially with dynamite,' Ian pointed out. 'Besides, maybe our friend the emperor, or his muse from outer space, is at least as sophisticated as the Doctor here and has overlooked the simple solution.' He flexed his fists. 'I get the feeling that we might well be able to turn things around.'

The Doctor gazed at the group like a teacher surveying his class before they graduated. 'We will split up when we reach the hill. Major, you and Kei-Ying will take everyone through the cave Cheng used before. Try to find a way to get at the water table, and breach it. We should try to flood the tomb if we can. I will go to the main entrance and confront this despicable abbot.' He held up a hand to silence any potential protestations. 'Now, I will not have my mind changed.'

Under cover of the gathering darkness, the group darted between huts and past piles of excavated earth until they reached a deep crater that had been dug into the side of the hill.

‘I don’t like this,’ Major Chesterton said nervously. ‘It’s been too easy.’

‘Shush,’ the Doctor hissed. ‘Never look a gift horse in the mouth.’

‘Doctor,’ Ian said slowly. ‘Look up there.’

Everyone looked up at the sky. The heavens were parting, spinning back from a central point above the hill top like an iris expanding. Then, through the widened eye of the storm, a blinding shaft of light stabbed down at the hill.

The sky split and the air screamed.

Logan winced at the screech. ‘What the hell is that?’

‘Hell is right,’ Fei-Hung said, stunned and slack-jawed. ‘The gates of hell are opening! The hungry ghosts are coming to feed!’

‘Nonsense!’ the Doctor snapped. ‘What you’re hearing is the sound of electrons being stripped from molecules of air.’

‘Like plasma, you mean?’ Ian asked. ‘Lightning?’

The Doctor spoke in a deep voice, almost as if he was enjoying being a doom-sayer. ‘No, Chesterton. Chestertons,’ he corrected himself. ‘The energies being transmitted across the conjunction are far beyond that.’

‘You mean this has come from some other world?’

‘Not necessarily. From another part of the universe, yes, but there’s no need to assume that the beings who sent it are corporeal or that they live on a solid planet. We just don’t know.’

‘But you said this wouldn’t happen until after midnight!’

The Doctor paled. ‘I forgot to take the changeover from the Julian to Gregorian calendar into account!’

Below, Barbara looked at Qin in horror as the whole mausoleum shook. She had a sudden premonition that she would be buried alive in here and never get out.

Qin was having a different reaction. He was laughing. Around him, the friezes brightened into life. The colours were deep and vibrant, painted textures almost tangible. Barbara could all but hear the splashing of the painted rivers, the sounds of the beasts in the undergrowth and the incessant

crunching of marching feet in the processions depicted on the walls.

Soft lightning washed across the images, the tendrils of energy spiralling around each other in helixes of fire. Ghostly images of fallen walls filled in the gaps as if they were Kirlian photographs, then solidified as the walls renewed themselves.

‘At last,’ Qin shouted to the ceiling, ‘I am truly immortal!’

4

The Doctor walked calmly towards the main entrance that had been excavated from the side of the hill. There was a ramp leading down to the main doors, and a tiger was emblazoned on one door and a five-clawed imperial dragon on the other.

The Doctor rapped sharply on the dragon’s nose with his cane. The door opened slowly to reveal a handful of guards and the mangled, half-melted face of General Gao. His eye-sockets glowed.

‘Traveller,’ Gao said. ‘You should not have interfered.’

‘Traveller?’

‘Do you not travel the stars, and journey through future and past?’

The Doctor was instantly defensive and suspicious. ‘How could you possibly have known that?’

‘You are known to us,’ said Gao’s sonorous voice.

‘Yes, so I gathered from my young friend Vicki.’

‘Why did you come to us?’

‘I wanted to talk to you, and tell you that you can never win.’

‘Come with Gao, Doctor, come and see who wins.’

The cave was just as Cheng had described it. The group had little difficulty finding it, and although there were people nearby they were too busy running around like headless chickens, panicking at the column of energy stabbing down from the heavens, to bother about a few extra faces. Even those in British army uniforms.

The Wongs, being most familiar with Cheng's story, led them down the narrow stairway at the back of the cave, which bored down through the living rock.

Ian snorted. 'If it wasn't a hundred years too early, I'd say this Qin had been reading too much Ian Fleming.'

'What do you mean?' Vicki asked.

Well, I mean, he even has the old underground base just like in the James Bond books.'

'Weren't you listening to the Doctor? This isn't some sort of underground base.'

'But this complex -'

'It's a mausoleum, Ian. A tomb. One of the old places the Doctor was talking about. And it's quite reasonable to expect burials to be under the ground, isn't it?'

'Yes, I suppose it is.'

By this time they had emerged into a huge cavern at the bottom of the stairs. Pillars the thickness of mighty oaks soared into the darkness above.

'Look!' Kei-Ying pointed up at the ceiling. The jewels that represented the stars were glowing and tiny serpents of light were slithering between them. 'What is that?'

'Look at the pattern,' Ian said. 'It's forming some kind of helix. This energy is being transmitted from somewhere else to here for distribution.'

'This is beyond me.'

'Well, you cut irrigation ditches to bring water to fields in a dry spell, don't you? From a canal or a river?'

'Yes.'

'But what if the canal or river dries up? Then no water gets to the irrigation ditches. Or what if the canal isn't there yet? You'd have to build one, wouldn't you?'

'But then, what does this energy irrigate?'

'Something that needs an astronomical amount of power,' Ian told him. 'I mean, literally astronomical.'

In the distance, like a lighthouse on the far side of a forest, Ian could see the flicker of a lamp. The soldiers fanned out between the mineral-encrusted stone trees, as did the Wongs. Ian realised there was wisdom in their actions, and he too

kept close to the columns just in case anyone - or anything - nasty was waiting for them on the other side of the indoor forest.

Their progress was painstakingly slow, and Ian tried to resist the urge to rush forward. He could already feel his fingernails digging into his palms with frustration, though he hadn't been conscious of even making a fist.

Fei-Hung appeared at his side. 'Don't worry, Ian. Qin must have some plan for Barbara.'

'That's supposed to make me feel better?'

'Qin thinks he's a fighter. If he simply wanted to kill Barbara he would have either done it immediately, or when you had shot the major and Qin had no more use for her.'

'I suppose you're right.'

'It's what I would have done.'

Ian shivered. He shivered again when he looked towards the source of the light. A stone doorway had been broken down, making a hole through the wall. The faint smell of ozone drifted through it, carried on grey air that felt and tasted like the breath of the dead.

Two statues were near the door. They were life-sized figures, and not of small men. Any colour they had been decorated with was long gone, but their faces and the detail of their armour were as realistic as they must have been whenever the statues were made. Ian tried to remember how long ago that must have been. Two thousand years, if they were contemporaries of the First Emperor. They looked as if they had been pulled from a high-tech mould yesterday. Not just one mould, but two separate ones, he decided, as their faces were individual and different.

Ian approached cautiously, hoping not to make a sound that might alert any living men in the corridor beyond the door. He held up a torch to examine the nearest statue more closely. It wasn't made of stone, but of some kind of pottery clay. Terracotta, he decided. He could even see flecks of ancient paint that hadn't quite finished disintegrating into the mists of time and memory.

As the flames danced around his torch, shadows passed across the faces of the warriors. Their gaze seemed to move with every flicker, their cheeks twitching, their lips curling. Ian told himself to stop being so damned jumpy, that the figures were only statues, their apparent life only the product of shifting light and his overactive imagination. He could almost have laughed; this same imagination had got him reading Wells and Verne. From there it had encouraged him to find out about other things, and so led him to teach science. Now it was playing tricks on him. If only he could give it detention for its cheek.

He looked quickly into the corridor, verifying that it was empty, then beckoned to the others. Logan and Major Chesterton rushed forward, surprisingly quietly, their revolvers in their hands. The others followed and Ian brought up the rear. They paused at the other end of the corridor, which split off into a T-junction.

Ian thought he heard a sound behind him and turned. He knew he had been the last one through the tunnel. Those statues and that damned imagination again. He turned away. A heavy footstep crunched behind him and he froze. 'No, it couldn't be...' He looked back over his shoulder.

A sword in a dusty terracotta hand was raised over his head. Ian ducked aside just in time as it slashed down. The major and Logan immediately opened fire with their revolvers, blasting little craters into the statue's chest. It continued to move forward, and the second statue was following it into the tunnel.

Ian scrambled back and the whole party split at the junction. Logan, Fei-Hung and a few soldiers went to the left, and Ian and the others to the right.

Right was wrong. After a few feet the corridor opened into a long, narrow hall, and the hall was filled with warrior statues. Tendrils of energy were twisting around its walls, and the room was filled with the deafening sound of groaning and the grinding of stone and dust. All around, the sound accompanied movement. Baked clay arms hefted weapons.

Dust fell from sculpted faces as they formed their first new expressions in over two millennia.

‘It’s the Eight Thousand!’ Kei-Ying exclaimed.

Ian shook his head. ‘I don’t think so. If the Doctor’s right, these things must be templates, like the copies of Qin and his generals’ personae that took over those unfortunate monks.’

‘Templates?’ Vicki echoed. ‘You mean they’re like old-style computer disks? The minds of the Eight Thousand were the formatted media?’

‘Yes, media for this other force to overwrite and replace. Except that this time it’s got ready-made bodies, it doesn’t have to steal some.’

Ian led his companions in a mad dash through a new opening in a corner. ‘It’s a ready-made army.’

‘Ready-made for what?’ the major demanded.

‘Conquering the world, I think. It’s an invasion.’

For hundreds of yards around the hill the ground was rippling and flexing. The surface of the fields pulsed upwards like boiling water in a pot. Suddenly, one of the pulses burst, a bronze blade thrusting up into the air. Next to it, a fist punched its way out of the ground. Then another, and a spear, and another fist.

Impassive, the frozen faces of the long dead kissed the air for the first time in centuries. Warriors whose torsos were sculpted into ancient armour flexed their moulded fists, and pulled themselves free of the earth.

The Eight Thousand were going to war.

Barbara might be terrified, but she still had the heart and soul of a historian who loved the products of ancient civilisations with a passion that few couples could ever hope to match in their love for each other.

It wasn’t just her job, or what she did, it was who she was.

Qin’s burial chamber simply took her breath away. She no longer felt like a prisoner, or a sacrifice, or even an audience

for the man's insane ramblings. She was a female Howard Carter, experiencing the splendours of a forgotten age.

The floor was a sculpted map of China, skilfully and exquisitely formed by the master craftsmen of the third century BC. Every mountain range was exactly modelled in miniature, every city represented by a model palace or pagoda. Rivers flowed through the valleys and channels of the miniature Middle Kingdom, but they weren't water. Mercury gleamed in the river beds, circulating through the burial chamber like blood through the chambers of the heart.

In the exact centre of the landscape, representing Chang'an itself, stood a large sarcophagus. It was carved with the full life-story of the First Emperor - his official version, of course - and inside it a figure encrusted in jade lay staring up at the ceiling.

Barbara knew who was wrapped in that precious shroud, and so did her captor. He was staring at it like a man possessed. The thought insinuated itself into her head before she could stop it.

Apart from the ubiquitous and ever-burning oil lamps, tended by a robot-like terracotta warrior, the chamber was illuminated by a faint column of light that beamed down from the ceiling to the sarcophagus. It had been barely noticeable at first, but was brightening as the minutes went past. Tiny flickers of electric arcs had broken off from it, slithering into the mercury rivers and away to parts unknown.

Barbara didn't know what it was, but was sure it must be something evil. She also didn't know what Qin wanted to do with her and it, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know, either.

Qin suddenly spread his hands wide. 'Be pleased, woman, and welcome your reunion with your friend.'

Barbara was taken by surprise, but turned to the half-hidden doorway hoping against hope that it was Ian.

It was the next best thing, and she felt a twinge of guilt at the slight sinking of her heart when she saw the Doctor. He was escorted by another terracotta warrior, and Gao, as well as half a dozen human guards. The humans looked warily at

the warriors, which had never spoken in all the time Barbara had been guarded by them.

In a way Qin was glad of the Doctor's arrival. He had heard so much about this man, and knew he was a threat, but it was always courteous to see your enemy in person before his execution.

'Welcome, Doctor.'

'I wish I could say it was a pleasure, Abbot, or whatever you're calling yourself today.'

'You may call me Emperor Qin.'

'I shall most certainly do no such thing!'

'You will, Doctor, or your friend will die.'

The Doctor fell silent. This mollified Qin slightly - it was only natural that such a worthy opponent would frustrate him in this way. It was something Qin could test himself against, to see whether he could resist the urge to rise to the Doctor's bait. He knew he could, because he was emperor of a country he loved with all his heart. His country and his people were his muse and motivation, and he would not let them down by allowing himself to be distracted by the Doctor.

'That's better,' he said. 'It is fitting that someone of your stature should witness my apotheosis.'

The Doctor snorted. 'I can assure you that is not what is about to happen.'

'No? Do you think you can stop me?'

'It is not you I wish to stop.'

This gave Qin pause. He was in control here. Everything had gone according to his design so that he might rule China and give its people his love for eternity. The loyal people. Others, undeserving of his love, would die. 'There's no-one elsewhere to stop.'

'But there is,' the Doctor said. 'A being beyond your imagination, which sits in your mind like the captain of a ship.'

'I am my own ruler, Doctor.'

'You are not, sir!' the Doctor replied, his voice becoming more impassioned.

'I am the First Emperor! I am Qin Shi Huang -'

'The First Emperor died two thousand years ago!' the Doctor insisted.

'I cheated death, Doctor. I fled the body until I could take possession of a new one. And I shall do so again and again, as many times as it takes.'

'Fled the body?' the Doctor echoed. 'Fled the body? And how, pray, did you do that?'

Qin hesitated. He knew this was what he had done - he remembered planning it, seeking out the sorcerers who could instruct him - but he could remember none of the details.

'Exactly,' the Doctor snapped. 'Qin Shi Huangdi died of obesity and heavy-metal poisoning from eating jade and mercury, and was carried around in a wagon of fish for weeks before being buried. You are nothing more than a copy of some of his memories, in a personality matrix. You are an executable application engram, not the spirit of a deceased ruler.'

Qin desperately wanted to think of a worthy retort, but couldn't. Suddenly, he realised he could no longer hear the Doctor's words. He felt a plummeting sensation in his gut, but that, too, faded quickly, along with his sight. Then there was nothing.

The abbot's body stiffened and his eyes began to glow. Light seeped from his ears and nostrils, and escaped from between his lips when he spoke. 'The being that was Qin is of no more use to us, Traveller. This planet is part of our domain now.'

5

Logan and Fei-Hung had somehow lost the soldiers in the maze of tunnels and corridors. If Fei-Hung hadn't known better he would have sworn the corridors were calmly rearranging themselves, ensnaring the intruders in a spider's web. The friezes would be confusing enough, concealing doors and corners, but the way they were taking on a new life

of their own, brightening and sharpening to a degree of realism that was utterly disturbing, made it ten times worse.

Fei-Hung felt, rather than heard, the click from under the slab. He immediately dropped, swinging out a foot to sweep Logan's legs out from under him. Logan fell down with a yell and a crossbow bolt flashed over the top of his head, missing it by a couple of inches and burying itself in the wall at what would have been about liver height if he'd been standing.

Fei-Hung stayed down, listening out for any more sounds that might indicate danger. Logan's eyes darted around everywhere, bulging.

'I say, do you think it safe to get up?'

'I don't think anything in this place is safe,' Fei-Hung told him honestly. 'But I don't want to live the rest of my life on this floor.' He rose cautiously. 'We should move more carefully. There may be other traps.'

Logan broke open his revolver and tipped out the empty cartridges. 'I think you're right, there.'

'The traps are a good sign. They suggest we are near something worth keeping people away from.'

He led Logan round the next corner, and noticed a flagstone that was raised perhaps a tenth of an inch above its neighbours. 'Don't step on that one.'

Logan merely swallowed.

Beyond the suspect flagstone was a series of doorways. The first led to a room full of the skeletons. The second was a floorless trap with spikes in a pit. The third contained old coins. Finally, the fourth was a more general store room.

Fei-Hung spied a collection of scrolls heaped in a corner. He picked one up, looking for something useful. Writing would never have been invented if it didn't have benefits, and even the First Emperor had thought a few books worthy of keeping.

The scroll was large, perhaps two feet long, and he only unrolled a few inches. It was a set of engineering plans depicting the counterweight system used to open and close the mausoleum's main doorways. In and of itself it was useless, but it was enough to tell him that his instincts

weren't playing him false. There were many scrolls here, and they were presumably all records of different information.

He stepped back out of the room, carefully avoiding the trip for the crossbow trap that had almost deprived Miss Law of her wedded bliss, and called quietly to Captain Logan.

'What is it, lad?' the Englishman whispered.

Fei-Hung brandished the scroll. 'Drawings. Engineering plans. There might be another one that shows the geological area and the water table.'

Logan wasted no time; he snatched a handful of scrolls, and started to spread one out on the floor, his eyes bright with excitement.

'Wait,' Fei-Hung said. He quickly sketched the ideograms for 'water' and 'level' on a piece of scrap paper. 'Look for these words. That will be the scroll we want.'

'Right you are, sir.'

Logan and Fei-Hung started unrolling scrolls and tossing them aside after glances cut tragically short by the absence of the required symbols.

After a moment, Fei-Hung felt a stab of guilty pride that he had been the one to find the scroll with the symbols. 'Look,' he said. 'This is it.'

Logan took the scroll and spread it out on the flagstones. 'It certainly looks like a survey showing a water table, though I'm no expert.' He pointed to some writing in heavier, more emphatic strokes. 'What's that?'

'It says, "Avoid disturbance here. Do not dig."' Fei-Hung looked at Logan, sure the Englishman was thinking exactly the same thing as he was. 'That's what we want.'

'We have to get this to Major Chesterton.'

'Then come on!'

Major Chesterton and his group had the misfortune to be followed by the waking terracotta warriors. Whether this was because they recognised his party as the greater threat, or simply because the major and his companions were close to them, Chesterton couldn't say. The group had managed to

find its way back to the cavern of tree-like pillars, but the warriors were on its heels.

Rifle and pistol fire cracked and boomed in the cave, every explosion magnified and echoing several times over. Dust and pottery chips sparked from the advancing warriors, leaving scars and pits, but they kept coming. Chesterton had made it clear that Vicki was to be protected at all costs, and his soldiers agreed. God alone knew what had driven the young lady to come along anyway.

Luckily, few of the warriors had weapons, but as they were bulletproof and had limbs as solid as stone - literally - this didn't make them any less dangerous. Nor did it take long for the soldiers to start running out of ammunition.

Chesterton was out of ammo terrifyingly quickly, and found himself in hand-to-hand combat with one of the warriors. Worse still, his opponent had a sword. The major barely drew his own sabre in time when it attacked. The warrior was surprisingly fast, and didn't seem to feel the hits he landed on it. It drove him back, further and further until he heard a noise behind him and ducked. A stony fist swept over his head from a second warrior who was coming up behind him. The bastards were hunting in pairs.

The major parried and riposted as best he could, trying not to let the two warriors box him into a corner. Sparks flew when their blades clashed, and small chips of pottery splintered off when Chesterton managed to land a cut on either of them. It was a losing battle, and he knew it. He redoubled his efforts, knowing that he was doing little more than giving them a run for their money. His sabre darted around wildly, blocking their increasingly furious advances, but his muscles were beginning to ache.

Then a massive, two-handed swipe from one of the warriors knocked the sabre clear out of his hand, and Chesterton stared death in its impassive grey face.

In an explosion of dust and potsherds the lead warrior's arm shattered and fell. It turned, and something blurred past Chesterton's eyes to strike it in the face. Its head came off

exposing the wooden plugs in its neck that had kept it in place.

Ian pulled the major aside. 'Looks like I was just in time.'
'What the hell did you do?'

Ian held up a workman's hammer, perhaps half the size of a sledgehammer. 'I found this in a pile of old tools. They've been doing a lot of work down here. Sharp edges didn't seem to do any good, but I thought that if these things are made of hollow pottery they should be pretty fragile.'

'Use your rifle butts,' Chesterton shouted immediately. The men grasped the idea straight away, and in moments the cave was filled with the sound of smashing pottery.

Logan had reached the cavern just in time to see Chesterton lose his sword. It was the worst moment of the bearded captain's life. He knew that Vicki could see the look on his face, but his emotion was too true to hide, even from himself.

Then Ian had come to the rescue and the tide of battle had turned.

'I've only seen that look once before,' Vicki said. 'It was Barbara, when Ian was hurt.'

Logan's lips thinned. 'I don't know what you mean.'

Chesterton made a count and discovered they had lost six men to the warriors. He felt empty inside, and unable to mourn their loss yet. He knew he would later, but for now he just wanted the night to be over. At least they were all together again.

Though his limbs felt quivery and his back ached, he forced himself to join Ian in examining the map Fei-Hung and Logan had found. 'It looks simple enough,' he said. 'If they haven't added any extra protection on top we can blast through this part here. We've got enough dynamite for that.'

'Good,' Ian said. 'Master Wong, do you think you can find this place?'

Kei-Ying inclined his head. 'Easily.'

Major Chesterton straightened and put some authority back into his voice. 'Right. Logan, Kei-Ying and I will go and

put a leak in this tunnel. Ian, I presume you'll be going after Barbara and the Doctor.'

Yes.'

'I'll go with you,' Fei-Hung said.

Ian sent a questioning glance to Kei-Ying, who nodded.

'Anderson,' the major continued. 'Get everyone else out of here. Take the furthest building you can find in the encampment outside, and hold it until the rest of us join you.'

'Aye, sir.'

Fei-Hung led Ian deeper into the mausoleum, moving as fast as possible but looking out for more warriors.

'Are you sure you know where we're going?' Ian asked.

'The emperor's burial chamber is at the exact centre of the mausoleum, according to the plans we found. The Doctor said the centre is where everything will happen, so I think it's the best place to look.'

Ian grinned as best he could considering that he was almost out of breath just trying to keep up with the teenager. 'You'd make a great scientist.'

'Healing is a science.'

Anderson had at first been glad of his assignment to escort Vicki and the remaining soldiers back to the surface and safety. It wasn't that he was a coward, or wanted to run away, but Megan did deserve to see her father again.

Maybe it was time to buy himself out of the army and go home. He could join the police in Glasgow. They were always on the lookout for ex-army types, especially sergeants. Then he could mix with all the riff-raff he liked - and crack a few heads and make a profit - and still see his family at night.

Then they emerged from the cave on to the hillside, and Anderson wished he had stayed underground.

The land was a morass of mud and half-buried warriors. Some of the warriors had freed themselves and were forming up into battle lines and marching formations, while others were chasing down the Black Flag guards and killing them, apparently for practice.

Anderson breathed out every curse word he knew. 'We'll have to try to sneak past them.'

'But what about the others when they come out?' Vicki asked.

'They're not stupid,' Anderson said. 'Not that stupid, anyway.'

'Run,' Chesterton said, and lit the fuse for the explosives he, Kei-Ying and Logan had set. The corridor they were in was totally nondescript, without any of the characteristic murals decorating it, but Kei-Ying was adamant that this was the place.

Chesterton pelted back the way they had come, unsure whether his lungs or legs were burning with the most pain.

When the explosion came it was deafening and almost threw him off his stride. He pushed himself along the wall until he recovered his balance and kept running. He didn't know how much water was being released, and had no desire to become a fish at this stage in his life.

Behind him, as his hearing recovered, he heard a sound like a babbling brook.

The water wasn't blasting through the tunnels under high pressure, or pushing down doors or walls, but it was flowing quite rapidly. It sloshed along the floor, seeking out doorways to spread through and scrolls to soak into.

In the burial chamber, a warrior was holding the Doctor by his upper arms. The column of light was blazing now, and Barbara thought she could almost see images or patterns in the light stream. They weren't faces, but forms - amorphous and indistinct.

Whatever was occupying the abbot's body - she knew it wasn't Qin any more - lifted Barbara over one of the mercury rivers and pushed her towards the light. 'Our dominion must be ruled well, with experience, Doctor,' it was saying.

'Experience?' the Doctor uttered in horror.

'It is fitting,' the sepulchral, and slightly maudlin voice boomed. 'We allowed Qin to be activated because the world did not become ours four hundred years ago. Your influence has been, and will be, great upon this world. We would have it be our influence.'

Barbara realised then what it meant. 'Doctor, I think it wants to possess us, and use us as puppets, like Qin.'

'That is exactly what it wants.'

The warrior started pushing the Doctor forward. Barbara could see him trying to resist, but without effect. Meanwhile, the being that had usurped Qin's body was pushing her closer to the light.

'Step into the light, Traveller. Be part of our light.'

The body of the abbot, so recently vacated by Qin, tried to push Barbara into the column of light at the centre of the sarcophagus. She remembered the Doctor's move from his fight with Jiang and twisted, slipping neatly out of his grasp.

The abbot wobbled slightly and nearly stepped in the scaled-down river. Nearly, but not quite. Barbara ran, noticing as she went that the quicksilver was being flushed away, and that most of the model rivers were now running with water.

The abbot's cadaver stretched out a hand for a lightning blast. To keep out of the water he had to keep going higher up the island on which Qin's sarcophagus stood.

Then three men stepped into her view. Gao, his whole head glowing, began to reach out. Behind him, Fei-Hung launched himself into a flying leap at his back, and behind Fei-Hung, Ian - blessed, wonderful Ian - broke into a determined grin.

Ian's hand was stretched out behind him and snapped forward suddenly, propelling a piece of broken stone at what he probably thought was Qin. Qin's hand flashed up and took the blow on the wrist. He swayed backwards for a moment, then steadied himself. His foot was less than an inch above the wet ground on the island.

The alien intelligence that was in charge of Qin made his face smile. The corners of his lips were dragged upwards,

bearing no relation to the rest of his face, and his foot began to move back towards dry ground.

Then, just for an instant, the light faded from his eyes and the smile became more genuine. Barbara locked eyes with him and saw not the solar glow of alien energy, but the fierceness of a tiger that knows it is at the top of the food chain. It was the look of a man refusing to give up his country, his people or his throne to anyone, least of all a foreign invader.

Then the burning projection of light was back, but too late. Qin's foot was already stamping down, slapping into the waterlogged ground with a decisive smack.

Blackness exploded into every corner of the mausoleum complex with a thunderclap more astonishing than anything the gods themselves could set off, knocking everyone to the ground.

Outside, Anderson's men were doing their best to dodge and evade the warriors. Some hand-to-hand skirmishing was going on, and a couple of the men were firing the rifles intended for the warriors at them, but it was a losing battle. Man after man was turning and fleeing, and even Vicki was smashing the hands of warriors with a rifle butt.

Then, suddenly, the column of light popped and disappeared, like a soap bubble bursting, and the warriors froze. A few rifle-butt thuds sounded, then stopped. Every one of the warriors was still and lifeless, a harmless statue once more.

'He did it,' Vicki said. 'The Doctor must have done it again.'

6

The rain whooshed through the leaves, hissing like a nest of snakes and turning the ground at the foot of the hillside into mud that would bog down any approaching horse.

This didn't impede the man who was making his way to the glow of the bandits' fire in the cave mouth. He was a monk in tight leggings and loose robes, one shoulder bare. He was

approaching middle age, but his body was still firm and there was little sign of a developing paunch. Though his head was shaved, his small chin was covered with wisps of grey beard.

Nature was all around him, soaking into his robes, filling his lungs and caressing his feet as he moved. He felt he was part of it, and so in tune with the world around him, rather than stepping over or through it.

Two other monks followed him through the trees. One - Yen - was slight, with an angular face and glittering eyes under straight brows. Yeung's torso was almost triangular, rising from a narrow waist to impossibly wide shoulders. His shoulders, chest and upper arms were huge, muscles upon muscles, and his squarish head rose from those mountainous shoulders with hardly any sign of a neck in between.

'Abbot, look,' Yeung said pointing. The abbot looked and made out the shapes of soaked horses above them, a short walk from the cave.

'It's them,' the abbot said. 'They will have taken their booty into shelter. Come.'

He led the other two monks up to the side of the cave, taking care not to disturb the horses or let his feet squelch in the mud.

The abbot stepped into the cave and immediately took up a fighting stance against the inevitable defence the nine thieves would put up.

Nothing happened; the cave was empty. Baffled, the abbot beckoned the other two monks to join him.

'Where are they?' the thinner monk asked.

'I don't know. Perhaps there's another exit from this cave. Did you see anyone out in the storm making for the horses?'

Both monks shook their heads. The abbot's eyes fell on several pouches and saddlebags. 'There are the valuables they took from the caravan. At least they can be returned.' He grimaced. It rankled him to let the thieves go unpunished. They should have been taken back to the city for trial. Recovering the stolen goods was as important, though, and it would have to suffice.

He was reaching for the nearest pouch, his fingers almost touching the leather strap, when an awe-struck wordless sound reached his ears. It echoed slightly, as if from afar. He looked around and saw only darkness before him. The darkness of a tunnel leading down, deeper into the hill.

Nodding silently to his colleagues, the abbot started down the tunnel. He moved without a sound, and so took the three men coming up it by surprise. A couple of quick knee strikes and punches felled the first two, but the third man, almost as big as Yeung, had time to draw a weapon. Yen's staff darted out over the abbot's shoulder, the end driving straight into the giant's forehead. The man crashed to the ground, his shout of pain cut off as soon as it began. The torch he was carrying bounced down the steps into the open area below, but did not go out.

The abbot would have preferred there to be no sound to alert the bandits, but it didn't matter too much. They would be no match for men who had been trained in fighting since they were old enough to walk.

The tunnel opened into a larger chamber where the fallen torch burnt on the floor, next to its owner. He was still alive, moaning faintly, but was out of the fight.

Yen and Yeung followed the abbot out on to the flagstones of a large cave. Shadows hinted at huge pillars, barely visible in the light of various torches. The abbot wasn't interested in the cave, but in the nine - now six - men who had entered it before he arrived.

The fugitive bandits were arrayed before him. They looked unsettled, but not frightened or angry.

The abbot stepped forward, casual but alert. 'Bandits! Give yourselves up now, and I will see that you are not executed.' He hoped they would see sense. Life was better than death, no matter what.

One man, clearly the leader of the bandits, stepped slightly forward. He was of average height, dressed in clothes that were probably new when his father was a boy. A patch covered his left eye and his right hand rested loosely on the hilt of a sword in his belt. He drew it, revealing it to be a curved

sabre that glinted like the grin of a madman in the torchlight. 'You're outnumbered, monk,' he said. 'Leave now and I'll let you keep the same number of limbs as you had when you came in.'

The abbot had hoped he wouldn't have to harm the bandits any further, but they were free men, as he was, and free to make their own choices. There was no need to discuss the matter further. Instead, a flick of his foot sent the fallen torch spinning towards the leader's face. The leader cut it aside with his sword.

Firelight waved and spun, causing shadows and darkness to tumble, as a couple of bandits used their torches as weapons to swing at the monks. Yen was fighting the leader, but a couple of other bandits blocked the abbot's approach to him.

He dispatched them easily, sending their agonised bodies tumbling into the darkness with several broken bones each. He could feel their forearms crack against his fists, as if he were punching through thin panels or decorative shutters. Even their screams couldn't quite hide the repulsive sounds of bones breaking.

It had been their choice, the abbot reminded himself. Then he was at the bandit leader's shoulder, and the man was turned away from him trying to recover his breath. The abbot didn't want to give him the chance to get back into the fight. He lashed out with his foot, the top of it smacking the bandit square in the kidneys.

The bandit pulled himself up against the wall of the cave, instinctively dodging backwards. He twisted and rolled to his feet, lashing out with his fists. He was quite good, for an amateur, but the abbot slid aside easily, letting all the bandit's punches and kicks connect only with thin air. Then a flick of the wrist tapped the bandit's ear.

This time he stayed down.

The abbot seized the man, dropping to put his knee into the small of the bandit's back, and grabbed his hands pulling them behind him. 'You should have listened,' he said. He meant it.

'These men are good companions, not animals to be slaughtered,' the bandit pleaded. 'If you think differently, then it's you who deserves to be executed.'

Then, out of the corner of his eye, the abbot thought he saw something move on the ceiling. A light of some kind, but that was impossible. He started to look up, but remained conscious of the bandit.

There was a light there, rippling and glowing. He opened his mouth to call to his two comrades, but never got as far as emitting a sound. The light gathered itself, and leapt down at him, blinding and burning him so much that he couldn't stand it.

He tried to scream, but nothing would come. He tried to move, but couldn't feel his legs, or anything else.

Then there was a merciful blackness.

He was lying on the floor of the cave that the bandits had sheltered in. All of a sudden it was more brightly lit, and he wasn't sure that he was in the spot where he had been holding the bandit leader. His whole body ached with a deep, icy fire that he had never imagined in his worst nightmares. Every limb felt as if it weighed a hundred tons and would need a thousand men to move it an inch.

The light stung his eyes, and the clothes he was wearing seemed to be entangling him. They weren't the monk's robes he had been used to since he was three, but finer, heavier garments. The robes of a noble, or government official, perhaps.

He tried to move his arms and groaned with the effort. Slowly, as slowly and painfully as if his arms were trying to push a mountain across the land, he rose. Through eyes that were throbbing and out of focus, he could make out a mixture of Chinese and white men. Most of the white men were soldiers in uniform, apart from a man in strange clothes and an older, white-haired man.

'What happened? Who are you?' he asked.

The old man pushed the nearest soldier's gun down with his walking stick. 'I don't think you'll be needing that now,

young man.' He stepped forward, looking the abbot in the eye. 'May I ask you your name, sir?'

'Abbot Wu.' He looked around. 'Where have the bandits gone?'

'Bandits?'

'My comrades and I...,' as if he had been called, Yen groaned, beginning to wake up, '...pursued nine bandits to these caves. They had robbed a caravan carrying supplies to our temple. We tracked them to here, and fought them. Then...' His voice trailed off and he looked baffled.

'You don't remember anything after that?' the old man asked. It was as much a statement as a question.

'No. One moment we were binding the wrists of the bandits, and the next I woke up just now.'

The journey back to Canton would take a lot longer than the journey from it, Ian knew. He didn't mind in the slightest, if it meant that: a) the threat was over, and b) he and Barbara could be together.

It was a pleasant September day as they relaxed on the boat carrying them down the Pearl River towards the city. Barbara leant against Ian, and said, 'I wanted to ask you something.'

'Anything.' He realised that the word probably sounded more soulful than he had intended it to, and thought about correcting this. 'You know you could ask anything of me,' he said, finally. 'What did you have in mind?'

'Oh, nothing much. I was just wondering if you'd marry me, if ever we get home.'

Anderson watched them from the wheelhouse and felt a certain warmth. It did a body's heart good to see two young folk so much in love. He let his lip curl, causing a couple of soldiers to look away hurriedly lest he take a punishing interest in them.

It was only when he was alone - in the privacy of his billet or, in this case, the wheelhouse, that Anderson could finally

relax. A letter from his daughter had arrived today, and he could let his face show a smile as he read it in private.

Then one day, as the red leaves turned to the shade that was the most valuable form of gold in the world, Wong Fei-Hung, his wife - and that was a wedding the time travellers would long remember - his father and Major Chesterton said their goodbyes to the Doctor, Ian, Barbara and Vicki at the old temple, and watched them file impossibly into the box that was still there.

There was a strange roaring sound from the temple. The box faded away.

‘Do you think we’ll ever see them again?’ Major Chesterton asked nobody in particular.

‘They will always be with us,’ Fei-Hung said. ‘You can’t kill what someone means to someone else.’

Inside the Ship the instruments ticked and whirred, and Ian felt at home for the first time in two years. Barbara sewing a dress for Vicki seemed a disturbingly comfortable sight, as did Vicki getting in the way.

The Doctor brushed an imaginary speck of dust off the console with a handkerchief, and looked paternally over the console room.

This, too, was a familiar and comfortable sight - a far cry from the days when Ian and Barbara had viewed the old man as a cold-blooded kidnapper who had abducted them for the sake of his granddaughter.

What sort of person wouldn’t be capable of doing something stupid, in a moment of panic, to protect his family? Ian sometimes thought this particular fallibility was reassuring. It made the Doctor less cold-hearted and alien than he might otherwise have seemed.

In many ways, it made him seem more human than many of the parents Ian and Barbara dealt with in the course of their work as teachers at Coal Hill School.

What made Ian feel most comfortable, however, and most complete, was the peace that had come with saying ‘Yes’.

CUTAWAY II

And there the Taoist priest stopped writing, with the rising of the sun. The cold night had indeed passed agreeably. But the priest's curiosity was not sated, and he asked the jade: 'What of the one you mentioned? What of his tale?'

'If you return this way another night,' the jade told him, 'that tale will pass that night as agreeably as this one, for it is another story.'

Translated by Major William Chesterton (retired) in 1890, from the surviving fragment of 'Mountains and Sunsets' by Ho Lin Chung (AD 1537).

NOTES, THANKS, ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND OTHER WAFFLE

Bloody typical, isn't it? Just as I think I've completed the set, written for all the TV Doctors and can finally relax... they bring out another one! But I don't think any disappointment' has ever been so pleasing.

This book was at one stage intended to be a more serious character-historical in the vein of *Wages of Sin*, but the amount that is known about Wong Fei-Hung's life is actually not very much. So, I hope you've enjoyed this Doctor Who/Golden Harvest kind of romp...

Special mention and thanks must go to: TP Chai, Keith Topping (he told me to keep *that* joke in...), Warren Albers (who has infinite patience for emails about fiddly language changes) and Nick Wallace. A special 'hi' to all the folks on the Outpost Gallifrey forums as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David A. McIntee has written more Doctor Who novels than he can count these days. A seasoned traveller, he is married to Ambassador Mollari and lives in Yorkshire with B'Elanna, Seven of Nine, a live Cannonball and a stripy git.

When not writing books he explores historical sites, researches Fortean subjects, teaches stage-fighting workshops and collects SF weaponry. His role models in life are the Fourth Doctor, Kerr Avon, Graeme Garden and Eddie Hitler, so members of the public should be wary of approaching him.

One of the statements on this page is untrue.

That's it, then. Go on, haven't you folks got no homes to go to? You can put the book down now, there's only the inside of the back cover left...